西尾維新
NISIOISIN
Illustration
take
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下
鬼かれ者の小唄
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サイコロジカル（下）曳かれ者の小唄

西尾維新

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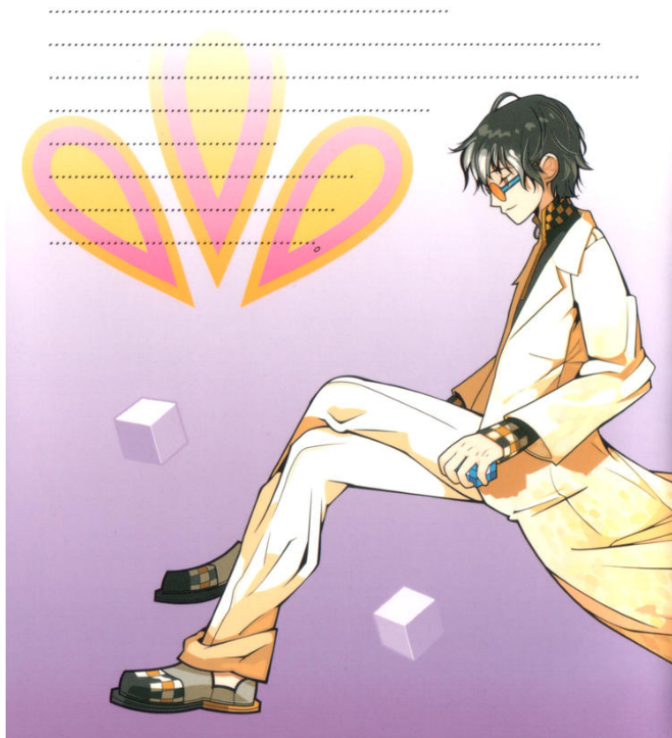
~Translated by suiminchuudoku

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1) Triple layered title: at face-value it's a Japanese idiom, 曳かれ者の小唄, which refers to someone about to be given the hammer showing some last-minute bravado. However, the way Kouta is written coincides with the character Ishimaru Kouta's name, which ends up making it look like "Kouta the prisoner." And finally, it can also mean sour grapes.

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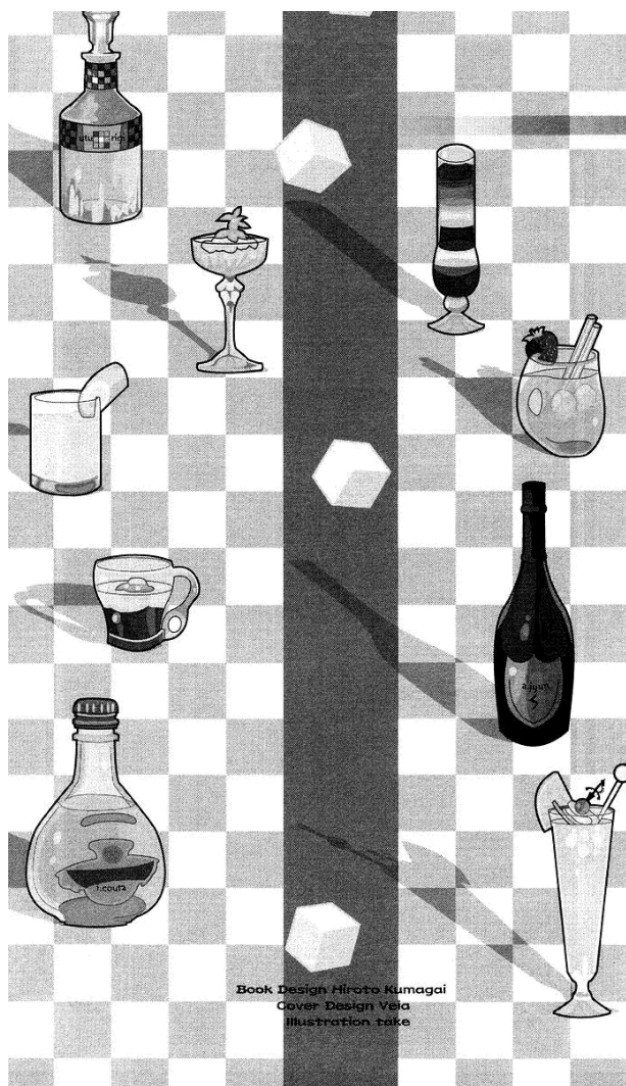

Book Design Hiroto Kumagai
Cover Design Veia
Illustration take

登場人物紹介

玖渚友（くなぎさ・とも）――――《死線の蒼》。

鈴無音々（すずなし・ねおん）――――保護者。

ぼく（語り部）――――十九歳。

斜道卿壱郎（しゃどう・きょういちろう）――――《堕落三昧》。

大垣志人（おおがき・しと）――――助手。

宇瀬美幸（うぜ・みさち）――――秘書。

神足雛善（こうたり・ひなよし）――――研究局員。

根尾古新（ねお・ふるあら）――――研究局員。

三好心視（みよし・こころみ）――――研究局員。

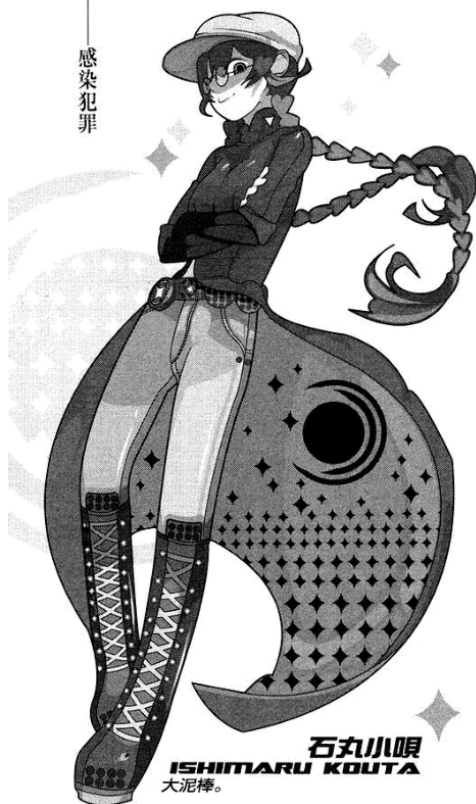
春日井春日（かすがい・かすが）――――研究局員。

兎吊木垓輔（うつりぎ・がいすけ）――――《害悪細菌》。

哀川潤（あいかわ・じゅん）――――請負人。

石丸小唄（いしまる・こうた）――――大泥棒。

零崎愛識（ぜろざき・いとしき）――――侵入者。

二日目（2）——感染犯罪

石丸小唄
ISHIMARU KOUTA
大泥棒。

Day 2 (2)

Contagion Crime

0

There are no flowers that do not wilt but there are flowers that do not blossom.

The world is absolutely unfair.

1

”– you good-for-nothing!”

Professor Kyouichirou shouted with a cracked roar, and beat Shito-kun with his wooden staff. Shito-kun did not attempt to get out of the way, took a blow to the head, and crumpled to the ground. However, Professor Kyouichirou did not let up, and continued to lay into Shito-kun's body with his staff.

“Good-for-nothing, good-for-nothing, **good for nothing**!” he repeated.

We watched that.

With nothing to say or do, we watched that.

In that visitor room in the first ward. Shadou Kyouichirou, Koutari Hinayoshi, Neo Furuara, Miyoshi Kokoromi, Kasugai Kasuga. Uze Misachi, Oogaki Shito. And Suzunashi Neon, Kunagisa Tomo, myself. Those ten were gathered. This meant that everyone in the facility other

than *her* were gathered here.

"–….."

At least an hour had passed since then, but a police organization had still not arrived. Misachi-san had apparently already handled contacting authorities after discovering the body, but our location so deep in the mountains plus the overnight rain affected their response. The roads probably were not affected much, so it should just take a bit longer to arrive.

A murder.

Is what it would be, would it not?

It did not sink in yet, but I think that should be right. It was not sinking in yet at all, that the Utsurigi Gaisuke that spoke so frankly yesterday would be killed, but that should be about right.

"Shit… it was supposed to be my turn for questions today…"

I mumbled that line while having Shito-kun being scolded reflecting off my eyes. If the reality were otherwise, what would I have asked that man? I feel like there were things I needed to ask, but I also felt like there was nothing to ask. In the end, Utsurigi was able to quit while he was ahead. Regardless of whether that was what he wished or not.

"– please stop."

Said Misachi-san, clinging to the Professor's arm.

"Professor, calm down–"

"Shut up!"

Professor Kyouichirou then flung Misachi-san away, and on top of that, beat her with his staff the same way he did Shito-kun. Misachi-san covered her face with her arm and took the hit, and then with a small scream fell to the

ground.

“**Each and every one** getting in mind–”

The Professor said, as he kicked Misachi-san’s back.

”–.....”

So easily they crumble.

Those things called people.

Right now, the small old man throwing a tantrum in front of me had not a shred of that presence, that veteran feel. Nothing whatsoever that I saw yesterday. In its place was someone like a child who just had a previous toy broken, someone just scattering things everywhere like an infant. Even a person of that magnitude falls apart this easily. For better or for worse, it was no longer the Shadou Kyouichirou that cowed me with his far superior presence.

That is why, if it were to have been me instead.

“How unsightly, Professor Shadou.”

Right as Professor Kyouichirou raised his staff to beat Misachi-san once more, a voice that sounded like an fired arrow echoed around the room. Due to that, the Professor’s arm froze at its apex.

The voice belonged to Suzunashi-san.

She sat in a chair with a leg crossed over the other, her jaw was raised as if to look down on the Professor, and truthfully, she looked at the Professor with disdain.

“Jeez – I had some expectations because you had a grandiose nickname like the *Mad Demon*, but those expectations were way off. You’ve got a boring life, you. Unbelievably boring. A person who’s lived sixty years loses control just because one person died, even beating on women and children while throwing a tantrum without ever bothering to check on the situation. Really, how unsightly, how unsightly, how unsightly–”

“Shut up! A girl who hasn’t even lived thirty years has no right to talk back to me! You know nothing!”

The Professor shouted, and then he threw the staff at Suzunashi-san. Suzunashi-san did not bother to avoid it, and did not even blink. The head of the staff shattered at Suzunashi-san’s forehead. Even then, Suzunashi-san simply snorted, “Hmph,” and continued looking at the Professor with disdain.

A look that was truly as if she was simply looking at a pathetic animal. As someone who had been looked-at by Suzunashi-san like that before, I could more or less figure how the Professor felt. That look made you taste how small and insignificant you are.

“You… looking at me with those eyes–”

“Professor! Please stop!” Shito-kun yelled while still on the ground. “Calm down – please cool your head.”

“Calm! How can I become calm like this! If **that** dies–” the Professor turned back to Shito-kun. “If **that** dies, **if that disappears** what happens! Everything is over! Every **thing** that I’ve built up until now is done for!”

That – Utsurigi Gaisuke.

”….. who,” the Professor looked toward the table where everyone was seated with hostility-filled eyes. “Who killed that? Who did it! Who pulled this stunt and for what purpose! It’s one of you wasn’t it! You shameless immoral!”

The Professor shouted and slammed both hands on the table. However, no one responded. That was probably not because anyone was intimidated by the Professor, but rather simply, because no one had an answer to give toward that question.

Suzunashi-san was no longer looking at the Professor, as if she wanted to say *there was no longer any value in looking.*

A bit of blood could be seen on her forehead, presumably from the staff. However, Suzunashi-san did not seem to care about that. She looked like she was thinking about something, but at the same time it could look like she was not thinking about anything.

And Kunagisa, sitting next to her, just quietly observed.

”–..... it is nonsense.”

The start of this – well, I do not know if it could be called that, but anyways, it was supposedly Shito-kun who first realized the abnormal. In the morning, Utsurigi did not make his usual call. That alone had happened several times to date – oversleeping or forgetting or mischief, or other such rather Utsurigi-like reasons – so he did not pay that much heed, but when he called Utsurigi, there was no response.

He thought something was off about that and let the Professor and Misachi-san know. And then the Professor ordered, *go check on him*, and Shito-kun obliged. This was around six-thirty.

And then Shito-kun discovered **that**. The bloodied body that had been violated all over with blades that belonged to Utsurigi. The murder art of the *immoral* that had been displayed on a whole wall, had been completely shown to him.

The discoverer of Utsurigi Gaisuke’s corpse was Oogaki Shito.

”..... immoral.....”

I do not know why the Professor used that word, but the meaning probably was straightforward. This was deep in the mountains, and thus in one way a sealed space. If someone inside were killed, then the suspect would therefore probably be one of the others.

In other words, a terrible and typical happening.

"– well, let's calm down, everyone."

Just as an insufferable feeling was descending on everyone – no, just as an insufferable feeling was about to settle in on everyone, it was Neo-san who changed the mood. As if he were about to play a joke on everyone, he lifted both of his hands and took a composed posture.

"There's nothing to gain from getting all hot-headed over this. Isn't that right? Professor. We need to think about what to do next."

"**Next**?" the Professor looked at Neo-san with irritation. "What do you mean to do now? There exists no **next**. Nowhere."

"Now now, it's not good to throw everything by the wayside like that. That's right, how about we make the person who did such an outrageous thing take responsibility. Come come, look at how out flamboyant it was, there's no way there's no evidence. Once the police arrive they'll figure it out right away. And then–"

"Suspect? It's one of you isn't it?"

"That's just short-sighted, Professor. Not like you at all, Professor Kyouichirou. Didn't we just have an intruder alert the other day? We can't just decide that it wasn't someone else. No, it must be. After all, even if this is a tough castle to crack, it doesn't mean it's infallible."

– intruder.

I stiffed a bit at that word, though only to the point where no one would notice.

"I don't blame you one bit for suspecting an inside job, but that's not a good way to start. After all, we – as researchers would have no reason to do that, right? **That** was a precious, precious **specimen** even for us."

“Neo!”

This time the Professor shouted in a different way. However, Neo-san simply waved that off and said, “Oh what does it matter.”

“The Lady of Kunagisa and that bright-looking lady, even the boy must have figured. That’s why they came this far. Isn’t that right? Let’s be through with deceiving and misdirecting and disguising against each other. Isn’t this a situation to just open up?”

”..........” ”..........”

Neo-san said and looked at the Professor and Kunagisa, and while the Professor looked back silently with his teeth grinding, Kunagisa simply ignored the words, as if she had never heard them to begin with. Neo-san shrugged his shoulders, “golly golly.”

“Well, that’s that, let’s continue. Anyways, that’s why no researcher would want to kill Utsurigi-san. That’s obvious. Then what? Would it be the Professor’s secretary, Uze Misachi, or perhaps the assistant, Oogaki Shito-kun?”

Misachi-san and Shito-kun, still lying on the ground to the left and right of the Professor, reacted at the same time.

“However, this too cannot be. Everyone knows how loyal they are to the Professor. Not to mean any offence, but Shito-kun’s devotion in particular is abnormal. Doing such a thing would obviously only draw the ire of the Professor, so it would be out of the question. Then, what would you do? Yes, you would suspect the *Guests*, the Lady of Kunagisa and her friends, but–”

Neo-san then turned toward us.

“This, too, cannot be. Because these three came to save Utsurigi-san. *Save* is a rather painful word to use toward us, but anyways they wouldn’t be trying to kill him. Isn’t that

right?” and then Neo-san turned back to the Professor. “Then, Professor, it means nobody here is the suspect. Of course, that includes you.”

”.........”

I do not know if it could be called summarizing, but Neo-san’s reasonable logic silenced even the Professor. No matter how furious or far his mental state was from being calm, whether down on luck or withered or shriveled or rotting he was still Shadou Kyouichirou, a man who could not simply ignore logic.

“And in that case, I can’t think that anyone other than an outsider did it. Especially given that much of a performance, you know, maybe it’s that enemy organization to the Professor? I think the Hariura Syndicate or the Visar Organization are particularly suspicious.”

”..... they would never be so overt.”

“Maybe. But the possibility is there. So I think it’s too early to declare that there’s an immoral within. Right? Isn’t that right, everyone?”

Neo-san turned around as if seeking everyone’s opinion.

”.........”

Indeed, I agreed. His speech mannerism was extremely casual, but it was probably a means of smashing through the heavy feeling. At the very least, Neo-san succeeded in calming everyone – especially the Professor – to the point of being able think rationally.

Of course, that included me.

”– Kokoromi-sensei.”

I, I called to Kokoromi-sensei, who sat a small distance away from us. Sensei widened her eyes and responded, “Hm?” and then for some reason grinned a bit, and turned to me and asked, “What’s it, my pupil?”

”….. what’s it, got something to ask, my pupil?”

”….. sensei. Would you not be able to deduce some things just by looking at that?” I said, nervously. “After all, you are an expert in dissecting human beings. How Utsurigi Gaisuke was killed, the cause of death or something–”

“Heheh. I’d never’ave expected ya’d depend on me for anything. Life’s pretty boring, but I guess it’s worth living for moments like these,” sensei gave me that look she always used to give me, that detestable smile. “Well I only looked at it, so there’s nothing much t’say.”

”……….”

“Bled to death. If not, shock from his wounds. Well, anyone could tell that much, eh,” the Professor began talking to everyone without looking at anyone in particular. “The time of death would be, yah, around last night, in the three hours from midnight to three in the morning, I guess.”

“Rather large interval.”

“Well yah. Normally when I wanna tell the time of death **with a glance**, I use their state of rigor mortis and the state of their eyes, but I haven’t touched Utsurigi-san’s body, and well ya know about his eyes.”

Utsurigi-san’s eyes, which were pierced with scissors.

“Sorry I can’t live up to your hopes, but that’s all I can tell ya now.”

”….. thanks.”

I nodded, and looked away from sensei.

Midnight to three… what was I doing then? If I remember correctly, I met with Kasugai-san around one, and then, after that–

“What here what here. Are you thinking of asking for alibis, young man?” Neo-san said. “Then there’s a better

way. Right, Uze-san?"

Misachi-san snapped her face up with a "What?" when she was suddenly mentioned.

"– what is it?"

"Go take a look. At the door entry logs."

"………"

Misachi-san looked dubiously at the Professor, who irritably barked, "hurry up and go."

"….. understood."

Misachi-san nodded, and then quickly left the room.

Log…? I tilted my head to the side at the word. What did that mean? Ahh, perhaps that severe security system for entering and exiting the laboratory wards (card key, numeric password, ID, voice recognition, and even a retina scan–) recorded everything in some central computer somewhere. I see, then indeed, the time of the crime would be definitively narrowed down. After all, in order to enter the seventh ward–

"… to enter?"

My thoughts broke off there.

Right. It was not just a matter of records. In order to enter the seventh ward you would need to **break through** that *severe security system*. Someone without being registered with a key would not be able to even enter, much less kill Utsurigi.

Then – I looked at Neo-san. Did Neo-san not realize? Because in that case, not one **outsider** would be able to step foot inside the seventh ward.

For example, the red Contractor, Aikawa Jun. She was so skilled in voice-mimicking and mind-reading, plus lock-picking that there would be no one to her right, and she was so far ahead that no one would be to her left, either (at

least, according to her). It may be better to only half-trust her words given how much of a narcissist and how much self-confidence she needs to be to go around calling herself mankind's strongest, but I think even that Aikawa-san would not be able to break through that impenetrable wall. They were strict, logic-based machines, after all.

Neo-san simply sat his large and wide body on a chair while looking completely composed. There was no way of course that he had not realized it. There was no way that Neo-san would have failed to recognize the paradox that he himself had said. Then, was that simply a means of placating the Professor?

– how shrewd.

I thought that once more. And as I thought that, I became even more calm.

As such, the truth is that the three of us – Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san and I – the three of us would not have been able to commit that crime. Because we were not registered as researchers, we would not be able to clear ourselves through the locks, and as a result, we would naturally be removed from the pool of suspects.

"–....."

At the same time, that rejected the possibility of **her** being the suspect. That left seven – that narrowed the suspects down to the seven researchers who were in this facility to begin with. Because thy were the only ones capable of invading a ward, so this was certain. There were no large mistakes to this set of logic, no mistakes that would require significant changes to this set of logic.

I subtly doubted – Professor Kyouichirou, Neo-san, Koutari-san, Kasugai-san, Sensei, and Shito-kun – and Misachi-san, who had left the room. Seven people.

However, what Neo-san had said earlier was not entirely a means of placating. I could not think of a motive for any of these seven people to kill Utsurigi-san – and in such a brutal way. I could not think of any.

"But you know," Neo-san. "All last night I was just in my lab – the fifth ward. How about you, Koutari-san?"

"Same here," Koutari-san gave a short reply. "No reason to walk at night."

"Same here, yah."

"I went outside once to walk the dogs. And I ran into that boy on the way, right?"

Kasugai-san said to me. I nodded silently.

"How about you? Professor?"

The Professor answered Neo-san's question irritably, "Same."

"I was here in this first ward the whole time, with Shito and Uze. That'll be apparent from the log."

"I see, and you?" Neo-san shifted his attention to us. "What were you all doing last night?"

"We were in the inn the whole time. I took a quick walk before it started raining, though."

"Mmhmm, a walk," Neo-san said with emphasis. "I see, a night walk, rather human. Hmm, then it would mean there's no suspect here. Because no one went by the seventh ward."

But Neo-san himself probably thought no such thing. To take a walk at night, and then lie about it, that is what a human does. Nothing said that everyone is honest to everyone.

"..... hey, Inoji," Suzunashi-san whispered so that only I could hear. "This is going to turn out to be a bit bad for us."

”—? Is it not already…” I glanced sideways at Kunagisa (she was still staring off into space) and whispered back to Suzunashi-san. “Not to take the Professor’s words, but everything is over now… because Utsurigi was killed, so there was no point in us coming here, and we are just a bother now.”

No, Suzunashi-san was probably not meaning that, but rather the police interrogation and such that would follow. We would probably go through a lengthy investigation process, and presumably, we would be considered suspects for a while, and would be stuck in the Aichi prefecture. We may be late getting back to Kyoto. I am a bored university student and Kunagisa is an unemployed hikikomori, so we do not mind, but Suzunashi-san has work (even if it is part-time). I thought that was the sort of *trouble* she was referring to, but Suzunashi-san said, “that’s not what I mean.”

“I mean that it feels like the wind’s blowing against us… really, nothing good ever comes of listening to Asano’s requests… I won’t say always even though it’s always the case… and I still always listen to her even though I know it…”

“Um, Suzunashi-san?”

As I was bewildered by Suzunashi-san, who appeared to be berating herself, Misachi-san returned. She had a troubled expression, and first walked toward everyone, and then hesitated, and walked to the Professor. And then she whispered something in his ear.

”….. what?” the Professor blurted out, and he confirmed something with Misachi-san. “Are you sure about that?”

“Yes… there is no mistaking it.”

She confirmed. I do not know what she confirmed, but in

any case Misachi-san nodded. And then the Professor took that and looked like he began thinking hard. And then the Professor sat in his chair and turned toward the table. And then, still seated, he hunched over in more thought.

".........."

..... what in the world did Misachi-san tell the Professor?

No, what was said was not the problem here. The problem was that the Professor heard that and regained his composure – or more accurately, the bottomless feel he gave was reminiscent of the first time I had seen him, and it was like he had settled back into his small physique. That he looked like that again was a problem for me. I did not know yet why it was a problem, but anyways, it was a problem.

In other words, I had a bad feeling. The same feeling I had when I confirmed my reunion with sensei swirled around my stomach. And that bad feeling had never once been wrong. Just like that worst fortune-teller, it never once missed.

"– hmph."

The Professor raised his head, his body still hunched over. Suddenly, everyone looked at the Professor.

"It seems we're in quite some trouble, ladies and gentlemen."

Upon hearing the single word, trouble, I looked at Suzunashi-san. She had closed her eyes, and was looking like she was trying to sleep. It looked like blood had already stopped flowing from her cheeks. I turned my eyes back to the Professor. He had regained that wily, old grin and expression.

"–hey, Uze," the Professor looked at Misachi-san. "– go contact the security guards at the gate. Tell them if the

police arrive, turn them back."

"What…" Misachi-san looked surprised at the Professor's words. "But, what, why…"

"Who cares about the reason. Well, right, just tell them it was a mistaken report. A child's…" the Professor looked at Shito-kun. "… mischief."

"….. huh," Misachi-san nodded without understanding. She looked like she did not understand the situation very well – no, like she did not understand the situation at all. "….. a mistaken report….."

"What? Hurry up and go."

"….. but, why….."

"Are you unable to work for me without asking for the reason every time?"

"No, that's not… I'm sorry, I'll be right back."

Misachi-san hurriedly bowed her head to the Proefssor, and then ran out of the room again.

"….. what's going on, Professor?" Neo-san asked, while staring at the door that Misachi-san had just passed through. "Turning back the police? I think that's insane. What did Uze-san whisper to you?"

"That's the thing, Neo. That's the thing," the Professor Kyouichirou grinned. "We're in quite some trouble."

"….. well, of course we're in quite a pickle. But that's a different problem. What good does turning the police back do us in solving our predicament?"

"Now listen."

The Professor waved off Neo-san's complaints. And then he paused for a few seconds, before resuming, "to start with, Neo."

"What you said is odd. The entrance to Utsurigi's seventh ward has a tremendous amount of security. No matter the

intruder, no one can get through. **At the very least**, that's the case for Hariura or Visar."

The Professor emphasized *at the very least* with staccato. I felt weight behind those words that I did not understand. What was this elder trying to say?

Neo-san exaggeratedly followed the Professor's point with an "Ahh, that might be true. I never thought of that."

"However, does that still provide the grounds for suspecting the people within? Professor, we've all worked together for some time. I understand you're out of sorts because Utsurigi-san ended up the way he did, but it's a bit of a tough predicament for us…"

"Out of sorts? How rude. I'm not, at all. I'm extremely calm."

The Professor said, boldly, as if his early tantrum was an optical illusion.

"But, however, Professor…"

"Don't worry, Neo. I wouldn't suspect someone within without having proof, right? Wanna know what Uze just told me?"

While everyone probably had issues with the first half of his words, they were drawn to the latter half, and awaited the rest. Professor Kyouichirou played coy for a moment, and then,

"….. last night, there's no record of the *Seventh Ward* being opened."

He said.

"….. no record?" Neo-san repeated. "No record, so does that mean there's no footprint of someone entering the Seventh Ward last night?"

"Exactly. The last person to open the door to the Seventh Ward was Shito and… the Lady of Kunagisa and that boy,

when that trio met with Utsurigi. Of course, **if you think about it normally** there shouldn't be an error in the log, right, Neo?"

The Professor this time emphasized *if you think about it normally*. As if he were trying to say that there exists a method outside of the norm. ..... perhaps the Professor already knew the suspect... already knew who the immoral was? It had only been an hour since the incident had been discovered, yet we may already be at the solution scene. However, not to take Suzunashi-san's words, but this is not a movie, and I am unable to predict the remaining time. Part of me thinks this is it, and part of me thinks we are still only half way. There was no way for me to know if there were only a few pages left.

My position was uncertain.

"Well then everything gets messed up. That means no one entered the Seventh Ward. Are you sure it's not a machine error?"

"That's impossible. You know **that** best, don't you?"

"Then..." Neo-san seemed to think a bit. "... in terms of possibilities, it would make Oogaki-kun or the Lady of Kunagisa or her friend the suspects, because they entered last... however in that case Miyoshi-san's estimation of the time of death would be wrong. Professor, that would make this an impossible crime."

"There's another problem, Neo," the Professor laughed with plenty of composure. "Well, settle down and listen to me. Calm down. It's unsightly for an adult to lose their composure. Uze **investigated** what went in and out of the Seventh Ward too... the records of whether the other researchers, including myself, entered or left."

".....? Other... you mean us?"

“There are others,” Professor Kyouichirou said heartily. As if the more he talked, the more his excitement meter filled. Yet by contrast, it felt that my feelings… or rather my instinct, or something like it, sank ever deeper.

I was beginning to understand. I was not exactly sure what the Professor was wanting to say, but I was beginning to understand where he was wanting to head. And the composure that was wrought by it, that self-importance that was wrought by it. Jones’ Principle1). People who laugh despite the things going against them are already thinking of whom to blame.

Then–

“The result – I’ll say it because Uze isn’t here, but the result – is that at night, at the very least during the timeframe that Miyoshi said, **no one left their own research ward**.”

Everyone sucked in their breath at what he said.

“Aside from one, anyways… Kasugai.”

Said the Professor. Kasugai-san twitched in response to the Professor’s words, with almost no expression.

“Kasugai left the fourth ward from around 1 AM for about five minutes. That would be the *walking the dogs* she referred to. But this isn’t worth fretting over. That sort of spectacle could not be constructed in just five minutes.”

”… well, thank you,” Kasugai-san said with a tone of voice that sounded as if she wanted to continue, *though I don’t really understand.* “Thank you, in any case.”

”….. hm? Then, that would mean…” Neo-san said with a faltering voice. ”….. huh? Then, Professor, that means there’s even less of a reason to suspect us, right? We didn’t leave our research wards. And there are no entry logs for the seventh ward. Then…..”

"An impossible crime."

Kokoromi-sensei stole Neo-san's words.

"Wouldn'tcha think that's the case, my pupil?"

"..... I do think that would be the case....."

I chose my words carefully as I affirmed my teacher's words. Indeed, theoretically, if you were to accept the Professor's words at face value – then it would mean no one entered the seventh ward, and it would mean that no one left their own research ward. In that case, if you were to summarize this with a simple word.

A sealed-room mystery.

Meant in a very physical matter sort of way.

"However, if this were to be an impossible crime–"

If that were what Professor Kyouichirou was trying to drive people toward, then what meaning would there be to telling the police off? Would it not be their time to shine if that were the case, I thought, as I remembered the pair of detectives from the Kyoto Prefecture Police. Then, naturally, I was able to see where the Professor was sitting.

He smiled triumphantly.

"Impossible? Such a foolish **thing** doesn't exist in this world. Everything is either possible, or **already** possible."

"But still, Professor, we're in such a situation, so why'd you turn the police away?" Neo-san asked my question exactly. "That doesn't make sense, then. Very unlike you, Professor."

"Come, come. Hey, Neo, how about thinking every so often? You'll end up with the title of idiot if you haven't figured it out by now."

"Idiot, then," Neo-san crossed his arms. "However, Professor."

"We aren't the only ones **here** are we?"

He said–

As the Professor turned his jaw at the three of us. After that, Neo-san with some surprise, Koutari-san without any surprise, Kokoromi-sensei who could not seem to care less, Kasugai-san who could not care less, and Shito-kun with eyes wide open, turned toward us.

I swallowed. Suzunashi-san still had her eyes shut. Perhaps she was truly asleep. When it came to Kunagisa Tomo by her side, she too did not seem fazed, as she simply sat with her eyes gazing off and not focused on anything in particular. Maybe she was thinking about how Raja Maharaja [2] and Parappa the Rapper [3] were related, or perhaps she was not. In any case, it was clear this was not a normal situation. I looked over our combat potential (though it was a depressing sight to behold) and then looked back at the others.

“I cannot allow that to pass, Professor Shadou Kyouichirou,” I forced down the tone of my voice and said to the Professor. “You make it sound like we are the suspects, and that we are the ones who killed Utsurigi-san. Even the Professor has limits on how far things can be taken.”

“Hmm? Hey, hey, I said nothing yet,” the Professor said with a cackle, speaking down at us. “What’re you getting excited about? Or do you have something you’re hiding?”

“Once you are through suspecting your inner circle, you turn your suspicions to us? What a simple thing to do. Indeed, that building had no security at all, so we can leave at any time. However, Professor, we have an even bigger alibi than you, because we cannot enter the seventh ward. Whether the logs kept a record or not does not matter given that we do not even have a registered ID, so we would not

be able to enter or even leave the seventh ward."

"Kahah! Alibi? I wonder! That word is too meaningless!"

The Professor cackled in a grandiose way, and then like a switch had been flicked, suddenly squinted his eyes and glared at me, then pointed his finger.

"You wouldn't be able to do anything alone, **brat**. You wouldn't be able to enter or leave the seventh ward. But you're not alone, are you? There's an **incredulous thing** among the three of you–"

He slid the finger that was pointed at me to the side, and the Professor – pointed at Kunagisa Tomo.

"Right, Lady of Kunagisa?"

As expected, Kunagisa showed no reaction to that. As if she was hearing nothing at all, as if she was seeing nothing at all, she did not react. However, everyone other than Kunagisa and Suzunashi could not hide their surprise at the Professor's words.

"Wa– Professor, but…"

"What? Neo. It's not something to be that surprised over is it? After all, the Lady of Kunagisa was the charisma behind that *Cluster*. The **former** leader and **comrade** of our victim Utsurigi Gaisuke. She can probably break through that level of security while humming to herself. Isn't that right, Lady of Kunagisa?"

Kunagisa did not react. In turn, the Professor seemed irritated… or perhaps it seemed he became a bit more desperate, as he immediately recomposed himself, laughed with a "hmph," and showed composure.

"No words because I'm right?"

"There is absolutely no logic behind that, Professor," I said, recognizing that I was speaking a bit quicker, yet still managing to calm myself down. "There is no reason that

Kunagisa would be able to break through that superfluous security…"

"Not just break through. After breaking through, she deleted the logs. A roughshod method, but I can only say it backfired. Not bothering to touch the logs of other wards shows how she is just a child."

"This is absurd. There is no reason behind that. Just a child? Who are you to say that? If Kunagisa can break the lock, then you…"

"There's a reason," the Professor said. "There's a reason why only the Lady of Kunagisa could do the feat of breaking the lock and deleting the logs. After all, **creating** the management program for this system, designing this *superfluous security*, and **manufacturing** the **materials** for this research facility at the mere age of 12 were all done by the Lady of Kunagisa."

The Professor said and pointed at Kunagisa again.

As for Kunagisa, again, she showed no reaction. She said not a word since she saw Utsurigi's brutalized corpse. However, I thought. If what the Professor said were the truth.

"She's an unbelievable genius, to the point that an ordinary person like you couldn't imagine. Even I can't understand it. However, that's why, Lady of Kunagisa… that becomes the reason for **prosecuting** the three of you."

"Prosecuting? Prosecuting?" I stood from my seat. "This is ridiculous. Such nonsensical reason would never pass!"

"Calm down, my pupil," Kokoromi-sensei interjected in the Professor and I's conversation. I looked at her and noticed that at some point, she had begun smoking a cigarette and had a can of cola in her right hand. When did this person do all this, really. "Didn'tcha hear Suzunashi-

san say it's pathetic to lose control of yaself?"

"..... sensei."

"Professor. Ya know in that case a buncha things still don't make sense?"

Said Kokoromi-sensei as she pointed her cigarette at the Professor. I could not tell its brand, but it was a very thin, probably female-oriented cigarette. But she used to smoke cigars abroad, so perhaps she damaged her lungs?

"Doesn't make sense? What is it, Miyoshi."

"What Neo-san said a while back, ya know. These three came to *save* Utsurigi-san. So that'd mean they've got no reason to kill him, yah? The Lady of Kunagisa is the former leader of Utsurigi-san, as ya said yaself, Professor, so it makes even less sense. Same as none of us having any motive to kill Utsurigi-san, these three've got none either, ya know."

"You have such poor imagination, Miyoshi," the Professor said. "Let's do something called flipping our expectations around. After all, we're intellectuals, are we not? Well you are into biology so maybe it can't be helped..."

"Ahh, that statement unjustly discriminates against a certain sect of academia, ya know. Like ya sayin' math and engineering're better than biology, an expression that condescends others, ya know. Ain'that right, Kasugai-chan?"

"Absolutely. That's a statement that could only be spoken by an engineer that mistakenly believes that the world is made up of just their equations. One must be embarrassed to say that. Their sensitivity must be dulling from looking at Arabic numerals all day."

Kasugai-san added her pace to sensei.

Hmm. There is conflict even within science. I had always thought people of science were all of the same side, but it seems that was a mistaken assumption, I thought, a thought that was certainly out of place here.

That said, Kasugai-san, she was like that last evening as well; she seems like an apathetic person but she has a remarkably harsh tongue. I might like her, I thought, yet more thoughts that were certainly out of place here. By doing that, I escaped.

"That's not what I meant, but…" the Professor smiled wryly as he was beset by two female researchers. "Well let me take that back then, Miyoshi, and ask you if there's any basis for what Neo said about them having come here to *save* him?"

"….. basis?" sensei looked at us. "Basis… well, ya know, but….."

"For example if Kunagisa had come here to ***kill*** Utsurigi Gaisuke from the start?"

"Kill…..?" even sensei was forced to furrow her brows. "What? Whatcha mean? I don't get it."

"In other words, they came to this research facility to kill Utsurigi. If that was what they meant to do from the start–"

"That's preposterous!" I broke character and shouted. "If you want to talk about a lack of basis, **that** is certainly **that**! Why in the world would Kunagisa kill her *friend* and *teammate* Utsirigi? There is no reason at all for us to want to do–"

"Hey, hey, careful of your mouth, brat."

The Professor's shoulders trembled with laughter.

"Your fate is in my hands. You should be thankful that I turned back the police. Can't you feel my sympathy?"

"I can feel malice for sure, Professor Mad Demon."

The Professor simply happily laughed at my retort.

“However, Professor, what the boy says has merit,” Neo-san asked the Professor. “Isn’t that line of thought too forced? Indeed, I understand where the Professor is coming from, but–”

“Reason?” the Professor stopped laughing. “Are you saying that the Lady of Kunagisa has no reason to kill Utsurigi?”

“Huh–” Neo-san momentarily lost his train of thought. “Yes, even if the Lady of Kunagisa can break through security and erase the logs on top of that. Even so, for someone related to the Kunagisa Syndicate – someone directly from the core of it, to kill Utsurigi-san without thinking–”

“You can’t say that, Neo.”

The Professor looked at Kunagisa.

“You’re right, we don’t know. I don’t know the reason why the Lady of Kunagisa needed to kill Utsurigi Gaisuke. I can’t think of any such reason at all. But who cares? It’s unnecessary. After all, this Lady Kunagisa Tomo is–”

The Professor spoke something along the lines of what he had said moments ago. However, at the end of it.

”–×××××”

Before the Professor could finish, my body already moved. It was not subconscious. My body moved with comprehension and understanding and clear thought. However, my thinking had stopped. I took a single step on top of the table with my fist balled. And as I was about to continue running that way toward the Professor, a blow hammered the right of my head. It was a cola can. At the end of my vision was the sight of Kokoromi-sensei running toward me. I see, I thought it was unnatural that she

suddenly began drinking cola, but Kokoromi-sensei had probably predicted this. I would realize that some time later, and the sight of Kokoromi-sensei ended up just reflecting in my eyes and having no meaning. I could not see anything. I could not hear anything. Could not see. Could not hear. Crimson. Everything was red. Blood color. Bloodshot eyes. Light and sound and everything was scarlet. However, Kokoromi-sensei's action had succeeded in stopping my motion for one moment. As I was about to resume running, from behind. From behind, Suzunashi-san who had caught up swept my legs out from under. My body floated in the air a bit above the large table. In that short moment, Suzunashi-san grasped my head and slammed it to the table with all of her weight behind it. The sound of the durable wooden table groaning. That may have been the sound of my bones grinding. Of course I did not brave myself so I felt the impact along my whole body but even so I tried to run toward the Professor that Professor Kyouichirou and I stretched out my arm and Kokoromi-sensei held it down. Sensei scolded me while slapping my cheek that had caused the cola can to burst and so did Suzunashi-san as she locked my left arm. It seemed like they were saying something but I could not hear. Calm down. What am I doing what. Wrong. Right thing I am doing.

Probably.

I think I went insane then.

The moment before Suzunashi-san struck me along the back of my neck to make me lose consciousness, at the edge of the red scenery in my left eye, I felt like I caught a glimpse of Kunagisa's blue hair, but I may have been imagining things.

2

When my consciousness returned – when my consciousness recovered to the level where it could be called at least functional, we were located in a cage. A concrete floor, wall, and ceiling. A somewhat heavy feel. A melancholic feel. Listlessness, as if I want to get a little more sleep. As if I had just been watching a bad dream. However a bad dream is still probably better than a bad reality. To the point that I would be thinking such meaningless things.

Ahh, whatever. Whatever everything. The back of my head was ringing. My whole body, too. No mercy, at all. Suzunashi-san and Kokoromi-sensei both. No mercy or anything useless like that. Speaking of which sensei beat me a lot over there. At least half, no, at least ninety-percent was her letting off her melancholy, but if I think about it now, the remaining ten percent was probably justified. I said if I think of it now, but I had no intention of pondering that at this point. Not understanding until you get beat, not stopping until you get hurt. Truly, I have not grown one bit since then–

"Ah. Ii-chan, woke up?"

What clearly awakened my consciousness was that sort of Kunagisa's voice.

"Mornink."

"..... mornink," I replied to Kunagisa with a light pose, and awakened my prone body. "..... umm."

I looked around again.

It was a a cell, unchanged from when I had looked around while half-asleep. Myself, Kunagisa, and Suzunashi-san sat on the floor inside it.

“My. Inoji. You woke up. Great, great. I was worried if I hit you too much because you weren’t waking up.”

“Well, thanks…” I bowed my head to Suzunashi-san despite the awkward feeling of doing so. “Umm… where are we?”

“The fourth research ward. The basement of the research ward Kasugai-san uses.”

”….. is that so? But, it looks like a prison…..”

“These are the cages to keep the animals for experiments,” Kunagisa laughed as she explained, for some reason enjoying this. “Ufufu-. This is the first time for boku-sama-chan, being stuck in a cage. First times are fun.”

“This is my fifth…..” I said, and I touched the steel bars. Obviously, they did not so much as brudge.

“Umm… I do not understand the situation very well… why are we in an animal cage? As long as we do not happen to have been monkeys, I do not think I can accept an explanation.”

“Why of course, the Professor’s orders. Or rather, Inoji, how much do you remember?”

”….. to be honest, not much. I know Suzunashi-san and Kokoromi-sensei beat me senseless…” I answered Suzunashi-san’s question honestly. “Um… when I was on the roof in the morning, Suzunashi-san spoke to me, and…”

“No way. All the way back there? It’d be a huge pain in the ass to explain everything from there.”

“Ahh, hold on please… I will calm down,” and then I placed my back to a concrete wall and sat down properly. ”… afterwards I tied Kunagisa’s hair… hmm? Ahh, right,

right. ….. yes, I remember."

"Good," Suzunashi-san nodded. "That saves us a lot of trouble, thank you."

"Ufufu, Ii-chan's memory's still the same. It wouldn't be surprising if you had amnesia from that beating though."

"….."

Huh? It seemed Kunagisa had returned to normal, I thought, as I asked Suzunashi-san,"So, what happened while I was asleep?" The decision to ask Suzunashi-san was based on Kunagisa having returned to normal, because that meant asking her anything would be futile.

"We're the suspects, basically," said Suzunashi-san. "And we were imprisoned here."

"….. thank you for that extremely succinct and clear explanation."

The fourth ward. The research ward governed by Kasugai-san. And then the basement… I felt like we had been turned into experimental animals, but whether that was any better than being a prisoner would be a delicate question to pose. To be imprisoned in this place, of all places, proved the Professor was nastier than I imagined.

Hmm….. come to think of it, for a certain murder incident it was my idea to imprison the suspect in an isolated location, but I see, this is how it feels to be on the other end. It is too late now but I shall never propose such an idea again.

"So, what exactly is going on?"

"Nothing at all, sadly. Well, the Professor said *We shall relieve you of some freedom while we determine how to deal with you in the future. Don't worry, we'll do nothing cruel.*"

"I see….." if we were imprisoned in a basement after having been told he was not going to do anything cruel, I

wondered what he would have done if he meant to do anything cruel. It was a topic that did not give me any goosebumps. ”….. ahh, I am remembering everything. ….. wow.”

Belatedly, I raised a surprised voice. I feel like I had been quite an idiot. “Well, that’s how it went,” Suzunashi-san said in an accusing manner.

“I didn’t think there was any point in rampaging alone, so I obliged them, but… well, really, I figured nothing good would ever come of going on a trip with Inoji, but I didn’t expect something like this. A pheromone for attracting accidents and incidents, I suppose. Attracting? Baiting might be more accurate, in this case.”

“This is unexpected for me, too…..” and this time, no matter how you might look at it, not a single ounce of blame could be placed on me. As long as it was not I that killed Utsurigi, I felt Suzunashi-san’s moaning made no sense. “Truly, unexpected… this time I had thought nothing else would happen…”

“Ufufu, this is why I’m never bored with Ii-chan,” Kunagisa happily laughed. “Really, it’s never boring. Life is fun!”

”….. your friend was the one that was killed this time, you know.”

“Hmm?” Kunagisa tilted her head to the side. ”….. yup, but you know, what’s done is done. You’ve gotta think positively in life.”

”….. I suppose that is who you are.”

I think that was the case, anyways. I think. That the Kunagisa from before was just weird. I think, for now.

“Anyways, the problem now… is how to break through this situation.”

"Break through… what a wonderful goal, that," Suzunashi-san wrapped a hand around an iron bar. "Even I can't do anything about these. If Asano were here maybe something could have been done, but…"

"….. Miiko-san can cut iron?"

"Well, she can cut konjac at least. ….. but they do say that Iaido and Battoudou can both eventually cut iron. Well, anyways, no point talking about someone who's not here."

"Indeed."

I looked up at the ceiling. If it were a movie or something, there would usually be a handy ventilation shaft or something that we could use to escape, but as you would expect of a real-world problem, there was nothing of the sort. The world is not so kind to let you get away through such means. Gosh, no wonder the air would grow stale. Truly, do they not know how to treat people in a humane way? Anyways, based on rational observation, there appeared no means of escaping from this cage. It was locked with a lock that looked extremely sturdy, and none of us had any lockpicking skills.

"Still… that geezer really spouted some bullshit."

"Woah. Ii-chan just got really vulgar. What a rare occasion, to do that in front of people."

"I can get rare, too, you know. I can indeed, really. I hope they're not setting up torture after this?"

If you consider that Kokoromi-sensei is here, that becomes a possibility. Leaving aside whether she would actually do it, that sensei is brilliant at doing things that people hate. It was not for show or out of whim that she was given the name *Early Harvester*.

"But I doubt that, you know? Because that person tried to

stop Ii-chan, right? If you'd managed to punch the Professor all hell would've broken loose. In that sense, Kokoromi-chan seems like a pretty good person."

"Good person… well, that might be."

Ignorance was bliss. Hmm, it seemed while I had been unconscious Suzunashi-san had given Kunagisa a lecture about Kokoromi-sensei. Given that it was Suzunashi-san, it had probably been relayed without saying too much.

"And you know, Ii-chan. The Professor didn't really say anything that nutty. He's always rooted in reason."

"Ah? Where. He's beyond preposterous. There's no rhyme or reason to the rhyme and reason. Even elementary school kids who haven't even learnt how to multiply reason better."

"I can't multiply-," Suzunashi-san butted in. "I quit school before I learned how."

"….. ….." "………"

"? Feel free to continue?"

"Uh huh….. umm, what were we talking about?" I forgot out of shock. "Right, the Professor's reason being insane. Yes. No one has left their research wards. No one has entered the seventh ward. Therefore, the Kunagisa Tomo Crew are the suspects. What is with that? Even Goldbach's conjecture [4] makes more sense."

"Crew," Kunagisa giggled in a snarky way. It seemed she liked the sound of *crew*. "Yup. Crew is good. Crew. Cruising along, as a crew. Or something. Ufufu."

"…. well, better than bandits, anyways… do not change the subject though. I am already over capacity… how and why are you saying the Professor's reasoning has basis? Just because the Lady of Kunagisa was the leader of *Cluster* she can easily open a lock like that, is truly preposte–"

“I can,” Kunagisa said, nonchalantly.

”—….. yes?”

“I can open that,” Kunagisa repeated. “Pretty easily.”

“Easily?” “Super easy.”

I clutched my head in my hands at Kunagisa’s curt response.

”….. what do you mean by that, Lady of Kunagisa?”

“Didn’t you hear the Professor? Boku-sama-chan made the core of that system. Well, to be honest, Nao-kun and Micchan helped me too. So I know how that mechanism works, even before I read about it.”

Micchan – Kasumioka Douji-san. A close friend of Nao-san, and if I were to borrow Neo-san’s words, a person who was once near the *Core of the Kunagisa Syndicate*. And currently – well, leaving currently aside, a long time ago, before I met Kunagisa, she was always a trio with Nao-san and Kasumioka-san. That said, Nao-san and Kasumioka-san were both even less than newbies at electronic engineering. Then that would mean Kunagisa had constructed it alone.

”– however, even so, you would need tools for that, would you not? If locks could be opened without keys just by knowing the system, everyone could become a lockpick. Even I know how the lock to my apartment room works, but I cannot open it without a key.”

“Yup, true,” nodded Kunagisa. “Without being Jun-chan there’s nothing to do. But – right, like, Ii-chan, like when we came into this research facility, you wrote our names, right?”

“Ahh. Wait, you were watching? I thought you were busy playing games.”

“It’s not like I’m playing games… anyways, the guard said then. These older means are tougher to mess with than

relying solely on digital security."

"Did he," I did not remember, because it was so long ago. "Hmm. So?"

"In other words, high technology has high technology holes. To be specific, when boku-sama-chan went to the seventh ward to see Sacchan. If I'd borrowed a computer from Sacchan then and accessed the mother computer in Professor Kyouichirou's first ward. And then I created a new fellow account for boku-sama-chan. Of course, as a BBC[5]. And then after killing Sacchan, I'd just delete it. I'd use a log-erasing tool and make it so *nothing happened*, including the door being opened in the first place."

Said that way, it did sound easy. However, that was just Kunagisa simplifying the explanation, and there must be plenty of protects, walls, defense programs, alert switches, and the likes.

– but if it were Kunagisa.

Indeed, it might be possible. Kunagisa already came bearing a high set of skills, so if she *knew* the security management inside-out.

Mysteriously, it was as the Professor said.

"There're access privileges for computer security. At the very least, boku-sama-chan having an absolute advantage over everyone else is true. Come to think of it, it was actually Hii-chan that was really good at breaking through security… not that boku-sama-chan was bad at it."

"*Hii-chan* as in </color red>Double Flip</color>?"

"Oh? Wowow, I'm surprised at Ii-chan's memory's functioning normally. Actually, abnormal is normal, so when it's functioning normally I should say it's abnormally functioning."

"Rather rude of you there. Utsurigi kept saying that

name. Next to you and Chii-kun."

"Hmm. Sacchan makes no sense."

I felt like being told that by Kunagisa is tantamount to being done for, but well, nothing good can come of speaking ill about the dead. Even if it were directed toward that weirdo. That Utsurigi, who was crucified and killed – or the other way around, killed and then crucified. After hearing that, Hi-chan or Chii-kun or Acchan and so on, would the people from *Team* mourn for him? As someone who did not directly know any of them, I could not make any deduction.

"However… what was that proclamation-looking thing? *You just watch, 『DEAD BLUE』!!*, was it? In other words, *Shut up and watch, Kunagisa Tomo*…"

"Who knows. Isn't it just warning boku-sama-chan to *not do anything unnecessary*? Like they're hammering in a loose nail. Heehee, yes, heeheehee."

It seems she had found the simile *hammering in a loose nail* amusing, as Kunagisa giggled. Though the mental build one would need to laugh at that play on words was beyond me.

"Unnecessary… trying to save Utsurigi? But, if that was unnecessary, then killing Utsurigi would ruin the point."

"I think you'll just have to table that question for now… because if you go there, you'll have to figure out why the suspect had to cut apart Sacchan so much, and why they took the arms away."

"But the first thing that comes to mind for someone relentlessly cutting apart a body is enmity…"

However, I could not imagine that Utsurigi, who had not stepped outside that building for over a year, could have wrought such enmity that he would end up in such a brutal

state. Of course, that was if we limited things to *within the confines of the laboratory*, but – I felt that I could not necessary remove the possibility because he may have done something while he was a member of *Team*.

"But, even if you can remove that lock. Even so, why would you kill Utsurigi… or rather, it would be hard to come up with a reason. Or rather, even before that, Shito-kun and I were with you the whole time you were in the seventh ward with Utsurigi. Leaving aside what you said with Utsurigi, that room had no computer, so it would have been impossible to access the mother computer, right?"

"Hahah. What a blissful thing you say, Inoji," Suzunashi-san laughed. "To the Professor, such a small detail is trivial."

"– what do you mean by that?"

"In other words, as long as there's **even a bit** of reason, that's enough. It's not like the Professor seriously has any conviction that Ao-chan is the suspect. As Inoji said, the problem is whether he can **force the matter through**. This timelag is probably for that."

"Timelag?"

"Yes. The Professor is probably – and not just the Professor, the whole faculty is probably reasoning out *proof that the Kunagisa Crew were the suspects*. Kasugai-san, was it? She said, *I think a decision will be made on how to deal with you around five hours from now.* Yes, we were just talking about that, until Inoji woke up."

"….. by which you mean?"

"In other words, Ii-chan," Kunagisa said without any care. "The Professor's probably wanting to make boku-sama-chan's replacement."

Instantly, I became aghast. Using Kunagisa as a

replacement for Utsurigi? That. That meant.

"In exchange for not handing us over to the police, they would want her to help their research – no, their **experiments**."

"That… that is definitely absurd."

"Yup. This situation is absurd," Suzunashi-san said with a bit of resignation. "I don't know how they intend to deal with myself and Inoji, but… right, probably hostages for Ao-chan. That's what I'd do."

"That…"

However, Kunagisa Tomo would indeed be a great replacement part for Utsurigi Gaisuke. No, she might be whole levels better. If **what the Professor was doing** was as Kunagisa predicted last night. Then Kunagisa Tomo would be the greatest of specimens for such an experiment. Utsurigi would have been sufficient, but Kunagisa would be best.

Ultra Humanoid Dogma.

"That… that is – that is something that cannot be allowed–"

"Woah there. Don't go berserking again, Inoji. If I need to restrain **that** alone, I don't have any confidence I wouldn't hurt you. Miyoshi-san helped out last time so it went alright, but you'll need to be ready to break half your bones."

"….. I am fine. I am calm," I said, as I slammed my fist against the concrete wall. It hurt. "I am extremely calm. Yes."

"Nifufu," Kunagisa (despite this topic being about her) laughed, carefree. "This is kinda nostalgic. This sort of pinch situation, this danger-like situation."

What do you mean, danger-like.

”… you look like you are having fun, Kunagisa Tomo.”

“Pretty much. But you know, this is nothing compared to when I met Ii-chan for the first time. It’s not like our lives are on the line, or worse.”

”….. anyways, this whole trip has been a waste,” I said. “So, what shall we do now? What now, Suzunashi-san?”

“Nothing. There’s nothing we can do like this,” Suzunashi-san said. “Well, if I don’t get back, Asano might notice and then have some sort of reaction… but that’d be like a couple days from now.”

“In any case, being locked up thirty meters underground like this means boku-sama-chan can’t do anything. They took away my phone and I don’t have my PDA. Powerless powerless gravity-less.”

“Why gravity.”

I sighed heavily.

“Indeed… there does not seem to be a realistic means of breaking through this blockade–”

”– oh, but there is a means.”

That voice naturally, seamlessly interrupted my dejected line. The timing was perfect, as if the speaker had been waiting for her seat all along. It was not Suzunashi-san’s voice nor Kunagisa’s voice, and of course it was not my voice, and it came from the other side of the iron cage.

There stood Ishimaru Kouta with her arms crossed.

Without a peep and without any presence and without any portend, there.

The denim hunting cap worn down to her eyes, the

denim coat, the laced boots. The eyes faintly peering from behind the glasses were sharply looking down at us. Grinning, as if she were enjoying the situation – as if she were enjoying the situation from the bottom of her heart, just like Kunagisa, Kouta-san smiled.

”– Greetings to those I meet for the first time. And good day to you, dear friend. My name is Ishimaru Kouta,” Kouta-san said while smirking just enough that we could see her expression even in the darkness, and then she lightly raised her chin. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Suzunashi-san warily scrunched her eyebrows and put herself on guard. Kunagisa's eyes widened and she tilted her head in wonder. I stood up with my back to the concrete wall.

”..... yo, Kouta-san. Thank you for last night,” carefully, carefully, extremely carefully. “How bizarre to meet again here.”

“I would say this is rather how opportune, dear friend,” Kouta-san said with a brazen attitude and an overly-intimate choice of words, as if she were bantering. “Quite, truly, stale and cliche.”

”..... what happened? Why are you here? Did you get lost?”

“Not at alllll. That is not the case, dear friend. Not at all,” Kouta-san fought to stifle her laughter. “I was told that a rare species could be found in the cages, so I strolled by to take a peek. A rare species indeed, one that they say **lunged after** that Professor Shadou Kyouichirou.”

”.....”

“You do not laugh at all,” Kouta-san sighed with exasperation. “Do you not know that smiles are a basic

pillar of conversation? I am astonished that you can maintain a consummate set of human relationships. Or perhaps you are unable to?"

"Thank you for your warning, Ishimaru Kouta-san. However, I would rather die than laugh for no reason," I said and nodded slightly. "So, what do you want? How did you come this far to begin with?"

"A good question. However we shall keep that as fun for another day–" and then Kouta-san looked away from me a bit, and glanced at other two, Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san. "Fufu. Two ladies in a cage. What a splendid sight."

As if she wanted to say the one option part was in the way.

Suzunashi-san lightly smirked, "heh," at that spontaneous, unexpected line from Kouta-san.

"Inoji is surprisingly well-connected, to have two acquaintances in such an isolated place like this," Suzunashi-san said not to Kouta-san but to me. "Furthermore they're both women. You're like Ariwara no Nairhara [6]."

"Uh huh," I did not really understand that analogy.

"So, what is your relationship with this wonderful lady?"

"Last night, I requested that man's hand, but he magnificently rejected my advances."

Before I could answer, Kouta-san answered Suzunashi-san's question. She answered it.

"Is that not right, dear friend?"

"..... yes. Well, about one-tenths of that is the truth."

"Ten percent is sufficient to be the truth. However," Kouta-san adjusted her speech a bit. "The situation seems to have changed, so I am wondering if you might change your mind....."

“Persistent girls end up being disliked,” Suzunashi-san finally turned to Kouta-san and spoke. “Is that not right, Mr. *Dear Friend*?”

In response, Kouta-san seemed to not shy away at all, and said, “That may be so.” She was completely parrying the belligerent tone of Suzunashi-san. It may sound like nothing, but I know how incredible that is.

“However, I am somewhat obstinate. ….. I would prefer if you toned down your belligerency. I am not particularly an enemy. If anything, I feel that we could get along quite well… especially you,” Kouta-san pointed toward me with her chin. “Do you not agree, dear friend?”

“You said *you were told* just now, didn’t you?” Suzunashi-san did not respond to Kouta-san’s question, instead posing her own question. ”*You were told,* what do you mean by that, I wonder? May I take that as someone having told you that we were locked up here?”

”– oh my. Did I let slip my tongue? Not that it matters much. Fufu, you’re as astute as you look – Suzunashi Neon-san?” Kouta-san laughed with even more pleasure. “However I wish you would put your astuteness to good use elsewhere. I said it at the start. *But there is a means*. Is that topic not more important for you three?”

A means. A means for breaking through this crisis.

Even Suzunashi-san fell silent at that. I glanced at Kunagisa, who was frozen in the same state that she was in when Kouta-san first appeared. In other words, her eyes were widened and her head was tilted to the side. Such is Kunagisa Tomo, whose thought sometimes freezes like this.

Kouta-san clapped her hands in front of her chest.

“In other words, this is what I am saying. *Shall I lend you a hand?*”

My face suddenly stiffened.

I remembered what happened last night.

”—-.....”

“You are suspicious? You are being suspicious of me? I understand your feelings. One cannot simply trust a person that spontaneously appeared out of the blue and offers such a thing. That is quite an ordinary response. However.....”

And then Kouta-san stuck a hand in her pocket and pulled out a knife. It had a pointed shape that seemed less a knife and more an auger, or an arrow. Shorter than a blade, and designed in a rather impractical fashion. Yes, that was not a tool for stabbing people or breaking objects, but rather its main use was not as a blade but as an anti-lock blade–

“My. It seems you know of these types of knives? Consummate, that allows me to skip the bother of explaining,” Kouta-san twirled the knife around. “This was a present from a friend, and I cannot use it particularly roughly, but anyways–”

And then she slid the knife into the keyhole of the steel lock placed on the iron cage. Clatter clatter, she rattled the hilt twice and thrice, and there was a sound of something being jarred open, and the door of the cage was freed from its restraint. It opened outward with a rusted squeak.

”– now we do not need to bother with anything like trust and can resume with an objective reality.”

”..... what do you want?”

Kouta-san gave me a distasteful look in response.

“You are quite rude. Did your mother not teach you that the first thing to do when you are helped is to say thank you?”

“Unfortunately I grew up absurdly pampered… and that

has caused me to be distrustful of people."

"That is rather consummate, dear friend," Kouta-san laughed with a trace of nobility this time. "How trivial. How trivial indeed. Of course, my request is unchanged and the same as last night, dear friend."

"..... is that so."

In any case, I nodded.

The same request as last night, which meant.

"..... what if I were to refuse again?"

"Nothing. That is itself consummate. Feel free to refuse. In that case we shall simply part left and right," Kouta-san showed me both of her palms in a *surrender* pose. "I was strictly trained. Of course, not by my parents, but... in any case, *If you want others to be friendly to you, you must offer them your kindness without expecting any compensation, first*. Everything **thus far** has been a service."

"..... is that so."

How much could I trust her?

My dictionary lacks an entry for having faith in people I have met for the first time. And trust would certainly be out of the question. On top of that, this person – Ishimaru Kouta, was no doubt a person of danger such that we would normally not be speaking of trust but rather of her level of danger. Given what transpired last night and, of course, what is currently transpiring.

And more than anything, her usage of the surname *Zerozaki* as a false name was the biggest red flag.

Once, I was taught by the red color that *there are no human beings that would use Zerozaki as a false surname*. And now the person in front of me boldly used that name and invaded without bothering to hide. What could that possibly entail?

However, yes however – could the situation possibly worsen?

"Kishimaru-san, was it?" while I hesitated in responding to Kouta-san, Suzunashi-san spoke first. "Kishimaru-san, yes, you–"

"..... it's Ishimaru," Kouta-san said a bit miffed. "Ishimaru Kouta. Please do not mistake it."

"I apologize," Suzunashi-san shrugged. "I appreciate the offer, but we can't take you up on it – I don't know what you're requesting of Inoji, but we can't take you up on it."

"My. Why would that be?" Kouta-san exaggeratedly tilted her head to the side. "**What** I am requesting may perhaps be something quite dull. For example, two thousand yen, or a deed."

"Because it would not be an exchange," Suzunashi-san. "We cannot leave here. Or rather, there's no point in leaving. There's no meaning to leaving this cage, right, Inoji?"

"..... indeed."

Indeed. It was as Suzunashi-san said. Even if we were to escape the cage, we would not be able to leave Kasugai-san's fourth ward. This building lacked windows, and the one entry and exit – was lorded over by the problematic *security lock*.

Even if – and this was a big *even if* but, even if what Kunagisa said were true. We could use a computer somewhere in this research ward and access the mother computer and clear the lock using security privileges or something. Then there is the possibility of escaping from this research facility. But in the end, the Fiat was probably being held down, and the gate was probably being guarded anyways. Furthermore of the three of us, only Suzunashi-

san might have the physical ability to leave this mountain without a car.

Successfully escaping without dealing with that multitude of obstacles would simply end if Professor Kyouichirou were to call the police anyways, and so we would end up locked up one way or other. And that would be another good result for the Professor.

”– that’s why leaving and not leaving this cage doesn’t matter to us, Kouta-san.”

Suzunashi-san laughed with a bit of self-deprecation.

“I suppose this is what they mean by surrounded and trapped.”

“No, no. At most this is simply pushed and tunneled. There is no reason at all to be in such despair,” Kouta-san said and winked. “**That is why** this is an exchange. I have no intention of performing any exchange without merit for the other party. A proper exchange is when my merit directly relates to a merit for you, otherwise it does not become a true cooperative effort.”

A truly splendid way of thinking. No, even I have to agree with that. What Kouta-san said was truly correct. However, even so, it was not just correct.

“Then, what do you mean? That means we are back at square one, about the *means*?”

“Absolutely, dear friend. As expected of the man I have chosen… truly wise, truly wise indeed.”

”………”

I went silent and awaited Kouta-san’s words. Suzunashi-san did the same. It was suspicious whether Kunagisa was listening to begin with, but she was silent, too.

”– find the ***true suspect*** and prove your innocence.”

Kouta-san finally said.

“Then, Professor Kyouichirou would no longer have a reason to imprison you. Is that not right?”

”– ***true suspect***?”

The true suspect being the murder and crucifixion of Utsurigi Gaisuke. The person who created the reason for us being locked up like this.

”– that.”

I placed a hand to my mouth and thought. I repeated Kouta-san’s words in my head. Right. I had forgotten. In the end, **someone** had done that. Beyond just saying that the Professor’s reasoning was absurd, I should have realized this alternate solution. Yes. That way, by successfully finding an answer, I could crumble Professor Kyouichirou’s scenario.

This is an isolated location. A closed-off location. There are limited conditions. Then the true suspect. **If the true suspect is within**. Then. That would–

“That would certainly.....”

“Not a bad thought,” Suzunashi-san continued my words. “That is certainly not a bad thought. However, that’s also not practical. It’s cool to aim high, but we don’t have time. Kasugai-san said *a decision would be made in about five hours*. We’re done-for then. An hour’s already passed, so there’re four hours left. To figure out who the true suspect is within those four hours–”

“Four hours!” Kouta-san repeated Suzunashi-san’s words like a song. “Four hours? Does that not mean eternity? Rather, we have too much time,” and Kouta-san looked at me with a taunting expression. ”– right? Is that not right? Dear friend?”

”..... if **you** are going to help, then probably, Kouta-san.”

I nodded in disagreement and disagreement.

As Suzunashi-san said, the situation is dire. As sensei said, this was not just a vicious murder, but a physically sealed room – an impossible crime using a hard-locked room. A strict machine gatekeeper, and the reason for Utsurigi being crucified so brutally, and the meaning of the words on the wall. It seemed an overwhelming problem to begin with, and there was a time limit on top of it all.

However.

As Kouta-san said, that may be the best solution after all. Even if it may also be the worst solution.

“So? What shall it be? I shall not force you to do anything.”

Said Kouta-san as she stretched her right hand out to me through the iron cage. Suzunashi-san no longer said anything. Kunagisa said nothing, too.

I resolved myself, and gripped that hand.

It felt like I had grasped the hand of a human being.

3

Suzunashi-san and Kunagisa stayed behind in the cage, and Kouta-san and I went off to **act**. It might be overstating things to say that we had split into a passive group and an active group, but there was no point in meandering about as a large group, and everyone agreed that at least someone had to stay in the cage. In that case, we could not just leave one person (there was no guarantee that Kasugai-san would return only four hours later. Once the *escape* is discovered it would not only be scary alone, but dangerous), and the outsider Kouta-san could not be tasked with remaining in the cage either (I suggested it but they turned it down immediately, of course), so the three of us – myself, Kunagisa, and Suzunashi-san – could only allow one person to leave. Suzunashi-san resigned ("because I'm stupid"), which left either Kunagisa or myself. Objectively Kunagisa is certainly smarter than I, but it would not be good to entrust her in the hands of a suspicious person like Kouta-san, and I could not imagine Kunagisa doing anything stealthy. No doubt, she would be discovered within two seconds of leaving the cage. As long as Professor Kyouichirou's aim is Kunagisa herself, as long as she remains in the cage then even after being discovered, nothing rash – yes, nothing rash – would be done. In that case, it seemed the only option was for me to leave.

After that logic puzzle similar to a *sheep and wolf and others crossing the river*.

I left the dungeon.

”– what nonsense.”

I mumbled the usual line and faced Kouta-san. She pulled her cap down back over her eyes, and then said, “Please.”

“Then shall we commence. There is nothing to be gained dawdling around in a place like this, after all.”

”– indeed. I agree,” I nodded, and then I turned back to the cage. “Well, Suzunashi-san, I entrust this place… or rather, I entrust Kunagisa to you.”

“I can’t really accept the task with much confidence this time, but, well, leave it to be just a bit,” Suzunashi-san said. “Inoji. We’re placing our lives in your hands.”

I was entrusted with something insane.

Please, entrust, placing.

Hey, hey, this is almost like.

We’re trusting each other, or something.

“Ii-chan.”

Kunagisa said in a way that could be called abrupt.

“Worst case… when Ii-chan thinks there’s nothing left to do, you can call Nao-kun.”

”……….”

Call Nao-san. I understood what that meant. If there is **direct** danger to Kunagisa Tomo, to have to depend on that person’s power.

”….. alright. I will do that. Really, as a last resort.”

“And, Ii-chan. Remember?” Kunagisa looked up at me and continued from her seated position. “What boku-sama-chan said a long time ago. That one of *Team*’s rules was to promise *never to leak info about other members*.”

”….. yeah, you said that. Speaking of which, I feel like you said something like that.”

“I’m breaking that promise.”

Kunagisa said.

”– yesterday, Sacchan said this. *I guess it’s time to **restore my reputation**.*”

Restore my reputation.

Utsurigi’s reputation – *Green Green Green*. That was his alias and his handle when he was part of *Team* as the ultimate, tyrannically vicious destroyer. Did Utsurigi say that he wanted to restore that? That he was going to restore that reputation? Then. Why did Utsurigi Gaisuke, who is no longer here after being crucified, say that? However, no, more importantly.

“Why are you telling me that now?”

“I thought it wasn’t fair. I can’t say anything more because we don’t have time, but I wanted you to know,” Kunagisa said with a rare calm. “Hey, Ii-chan. Ii-chan won’t abandon **me** or hate me, right?”

“Of course not.”

I answered immediately.

I was able to answer immediately.

But it was probably not Kunagisa who felt relieved at that, but rather myself.

“Stop confirming such obvious things. It is quite bothersome to need to answer. **Something as pitiful as this** is nothing to us, Tomo.”

“Mm. That’s good.”

And then Kunagisa laughed carefreely as usual. That was enough. I resolved myself and then said, “Shall we go then, Kouta-san.” Kouta-san nodded and began walking, “alright, then let us begin with formulating a battle plan.”

“Recognizing and confirming the current situation. We must leave this building and go outside for that.”

“Indeed. I know I asked earlier, but Kouta-san, how did you get into this building in the first place?”

“I shall explain next. Anyways, come along for now.”

I quickly followed behind Kouta-san, who marched forward. There was soon a turn, which took the cage, and Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san, out of sight.

That was around when Kouta-san began giggling.

”– what is wrong?”

“Nooothing. Quite well. Would it be friendship, or would it be love, or what would it be. The two are both quite attractive, dear friend, so which of the two are you after?”

“It is not like that, Suzunashi-san and Kunagisa both. I am truly after a samurai-like person who lives next door at my apartment,” I answered in monotone. “And something like that is irrelevant to you, anyways.”

“Fufu. Of course it has no relevancy to me. Everything about you is completely and irrelevantly unrelated to myself. That is certainly consummate. Yet even so, is it not normal to want to know more about the partner which whom I am about to share life and death, dear friend?”

“I have no intention of committing suicide with you, Kouta-san,” I tried to act as uninterested as possible. “And on that note, it sounds like you know about me to some extent, but I know absolutely nothing about you. I cannot help but feel apprehension because of that.”

“Apprehension. Very well. Please remain apprehensive. That is probably for the best,” Kouta-san replied, continuing forward without dropping her pace. “As long as you keep your promise, I shall say no complaints. What I want is not trust but honesty.”

“How pragmatic.”

“Just realistic.”

It was a conclusion to a truly pointless conversation. Part of me wondered if this was alright, and the other part felt

that this was sufficient. After all, relying on this person was my only hope.

"– this way."

Kouta-san pointed to a green, steel door. She unlocked the door with that knife, and then pushed the door. There were stairs leading up. From its position, it seemed these were emergency stairs.

"– you came from here?"

“Yes. The elevator makes quite a sound and echo. Using it would give myself away immediately. Now. Quickly. We have a time limit do we not? It would be consummate to hurry.”

After saying that to a hesitant me, Kouta-san began climbing the stairs. I could see that she was absolutely sure of herself. In other words, she had predicted everything that had transpired so far. That I would accept her request, and that I would dutifully oblige her, all of that had been planned. I shook my head lightly, and then took a step on the stairs. The door closed on its own, and the lock sounded. It seemed this door had a simple, automated locking mechanism.

“If I may amend one misunderstanding,” Kouta-san said. “You are correct in saying that most things have gone as I expected, but even so there was one thing that I can say was unexpected.”

"..... I said nothing."

“I thought you would take a bit longer to come to this decision,” Kouta-san continued without responding. “Given your attitude last night. Of course, what happened is much more consummate; however, you do not seem the type to be this understanding. Despite the situation you were in, why did you accept my offer so quickly?”

”….. I have a friend,” I sighed before answering. “A person similar to you. No, you two are not similar at all, and, it is not as if I understand you, or understand that person either, but your type… your positions, from a categorization standpoint, seem the same.”

”….. hmm. How intriguing.”

“Of course, that person is a contractor, a do-it-all sort of person,” I said. “And not a thief like yourself.”

”– fufu. I see. That is also consummate….. I am not that black-suited lady, but indeed, it seems you are quite well-connected. Regardless, it is splendid that we have come to an understanding so quickly.”

Black-suited? Who? Ahh, Suzunashi-san.

We passed by the door to the first floor, and Kouta-san headed toward the second floor.

”…..? Are we still going up? There is only an entrance on the first floor, right?”

“You are troubled because we cannot enter or leave using that entrance, are you not? If you cannot go through normally, then it is consummate to try abnormal means. More importantly… more importantly, as I shall put it, what do you think?”

“What? Please be clearer.”

“Hmmmm. This incident… well, it is an incident after all. This incident, how confident are you that you can solve it safely? I thought I should ask that, first.”

“We are already not safe. Because we were locked up in such a place already….. but anyways, confidence. If there is one thing I can say,” I was not imitating Kouta-san, but I held my answer back a bit. “I have experienced this sort of pattern a few times. And I have never once been unable to solve the mystery.”

”..... surprisingly confident. I am slightly surprised.”

“Just speaking from experience. Just. ..... or rather, this feels lacking,” I said without any emotion. “Compared to the incident that destroyed Kunagisa and I, this is really lackluster. To have an old comrade of Kunagisa have his eyes stabbed through his mouth stabbed through his chest opened his stomach stabbed his legs nailed his arms chopped off and crucified and decorated with a blood message, well it might score a sixty.”

“That is still a passing grade.”

“Perhaps. ..... however, this is the first time I have a time limit. Four hours.... or maybe less. We would have to return by then.”

“If you are unable to solve the mystery within four hours, what do you intend to do?” Kouta-san asked. “Despite what I said in front of the black-suited lady, you should not rely on me much. My objective lies elsewhere, and our relationship is just an alliance, so we are not sharing life and death so much as simply traveling on the same boat.”

“I understand. Indeed, traveling on the same boat. Yes..... in the case that I am unable to solve anything.”

“Would you call... *Nao-kun*?”

Kouta-san lowered her voice just a bit.

“That is a last resort. No, if we are to call cooperating with you the worst case scenario, then we would call that one the lowest case scenario.”

If I were to choose that option – if Kunagisa Nao were to learn that his sister Kunagisa Tomo were being treated in such a way, this incident would be dealt with not within four hours but within four seconds. Nao-san would resolve this incident with every power he can access – no, he would **destroy** it, without a doubt. However, that. That

cannot be allowed to happen.

”– if possible, it is not an option I would like to choose.”

”….. hmm? I do not understand… but it does appear you do not desire that option. Then, what do you intend to do? Would you call for that *contractor* you mentioned earlier?”

“That….. to be honest is also something I would prefer to avoid,” I answered honestly. “That has nothing to do with best or worst case, but rather, yes. I would prefer to remain that person’s friend. I want to remain **just** a friend with that person. I do not want to create something like debt or gratitude or anything of the sort, and I would like to avoid a business relationship even more.”

I said, but I have already actually been in her care quite a bit.

“If it were just helping Utsurigi, I would not have minded borrowing her hand, but with things having blown out of control like this it becomes harder to ask for help.”

“You do not want to bother that person because they are a friend? That is the opposite of my line of thought. What is a friend if one cannot help in a situation like this?”

“I have a lot of things going on.”

That sort of thing is difficult to define. It is vague and unclear. Yet the more you attempt to clarify it, the more it becomes difficult to grasp, and it is not something that I am willing to expend significant effort on in order to clarify. Particularly given my current state.

“To me, living is the same as being contradictory,” I said. “I am glad I was able to become that person’s friend. To be a friend of such a splendid person, to be able to talk about pointless topics, to be able to eat together, to be able to sleep under the same roof, to be played around with, to be teased, to be punched, to be picked on. Anyways, I am glad

I am a friend of that person. That is why I want one day for that person to feel glad to have been a friend of mine. It is pointless, but that is all."

"– I see. ….. well, that is indeed consummate," said Kouta-san, who seemed for some reason pleased by my words, as she turned back a bit and looked at me with a glowing face. Surprisingly, that was rather, an attractive look. "Then, what will you do? If solving this mystery is impossible within four hours? To be clear, I would personally say that negotiating with that Professor would be impossible. To mollify that Mad Demon who even now is probably hammering away at his dodgy dealings."

"….. you were listening to us?"

"To an extent. That Kunagisa-san is being looked at as a replacement for Utsurigi-san, or something."

"Is that so. How astude, really… yes….. in that case, there is no other choice. I will give up."

"What a lie," Kouta-san immediately responded. "You do not look the type to give up so easily."

"Is that so. That may be true."

However, there was no lie in my answer to Kouta-san. It was entirely honest, entirely what I believed. Yes, in that case, I will give up. In that case, I will no longer attempt to resolve this in a clean manner. I will give up attempting to end this situation without dirtying my hands. I will not think to attempt to barely maintain this life of normalcy that I had kept for nineteen years, given the situation. I subtly made sure the knife in my pocket had not been taken away.

"Oh well. It is not consummate to keep dwelling on the case that the mystery is not solved. Let us think of more bright futures."

And then Kouta-san finished climbing the stairs. Finished climbing? In other words, this was the fourth – no, that is not right,–

”– the rooftop.”

“That’s right,” Kouta-san nodded as she opened the door with that knife. “The rooftop.”

I followed Kouta-san out onto the rooftop. It was still tiled, and there was a clothesline in front. It was probably put there for drying laundry. However, there were no traces of anyone having used it. Or rather, this place was so barren of human life that it was worth asking if anyone had ever set foot on the rooftop since this place was built.

There were puddles on top of several tiles. Remnants of last night.

This time I looked up and gazed at the weather. It was quite pretty. The vast expanse of greenery beyond the castle wall. This would be what they call picturesque: hardly any man-made objects in sight. Actually, it even begins to look unnatural because so much nature spread out before me.

Still, there was no time to be breath-taken by that scenery.

“Please don’t go too close to the greenery. While the probability is low because none of the research wards have any windows, people walking between buildings can still see us.”

So Kouta-san said, but she walked toward the greenery anyways. I was not able to understand the situation, and followed her.

“Um, Kouta-san. Are you going to say we are going to rappel down?”

“That is not a bad consummate, but that would not

explain how I **got in**," Kouta-san said and then she stopped immediately upon reaching the edge of the fifth ward. And then she remained immobile. "..... well, please do follow after me."

She said that quickly, and then took a step back, and then with used the momentum to jump. Jump. in other words, right at the edge of the rooftop – or if I were to explain this even more precisely, one millimeter before the gutter draining away the rain water, Kouta-san leaped. What lay ahead. Was just, nothing, and.

The fifth ward.

With elegance that made me imagine a twirl-like sound effect, Kouta-san landed on the other side, and then turned to me. Her left and right braids fell on her shoulders a couple second late.

"– now, your turn."

"Now, your turn..." even I hesitated. "What do you mean *now, your turn*?"

"It is not much. A leap of just two meters is surely easy to an adult male, is it not?"

Two meters. Indeed, the distance between the fourth and fifth ward was probably around this much. As I had felt yesterday, the buildings in this facility were closely built, as if squeezed together. That was why jumping from one building to another was not impossible, as Kouta-san said. Still, even if it were just two meters.

I walked to the edge of the building and looked down. If I remember correctly, the fourth ward was four stories. However, each floor seemed to have been built taller than a normal building, so no matter how much leeway you gave, this building could not be shorter than some ten meters altitude. You would die even if you were to fall on your

feet.

Of course, a two-meter jump is simple. However, if failure means death, it gains some pressure.

“My, my. I cannot imagine this to be the case, but perhaps you’re a wuss? Quite a surprise to discover that my dear friend was such a chicken.”

”….. how about the excuse that I am still underaged and not an adult?”

“If you want to say that you do not intend to break through the situation, if you do not want to show me that you are not a chicken, then by all means.”

Spoken that way, it seemed I had no choice but to resolve myself. Kouta-san only needed a meter’s worth of acceleration, but – and that was probably enough even for myself too, but – I took three, no four steps worth of distance, and then took yet another step back, and then I inhaled deeply, and then took another step back.

New genre: athletic mystery-solving.

”….. truly, nonsense from start to finish.”

I mumbled, and then I began running. There was no mistake that I could jump. From the fourth to the fifth ward, jumping itself is simple. So the problem is before that, whether I could time it right or not. If I were to trip, that would be the end of the volume. Perhaps out of that fear, in the end, I jumped ten-some centimeters before the edge.

After the feeling of having been freed from gravity,

I felt the impact along my whole body.

”– phew.”

I landed on both legs. In a crouching position, I existed on the rooftop of the fifth ward. At the very least, the story did not end in an unseemly way like a red tomato or a

squished pomegranate.

Clap clap clap, Kouta-san faux applauded, and then said, “Magnificent, dear friend.”

“Around three meters. That far with that level of acceleration, hmm, would imply that you have a consummate level of athleticism.”

“I favor both athleticism and literature,” I gradually calmed by beating heart, and acted composed. I did not think there was any need to look cool about it, but, regardless of pride or self-esteem, I felt it would not be good to show Kouta-san much weakness. “So? Now that we are on the fifth ward, what do we do?”

“What do we do?”

“What are we doing next? If this building has a security at the entrance, then there is no change from the fourth ward. As you said we could do at the start, we did indeed leave the fourth ward… but if we took too much time, we might be found–”

– just as I said that to Kouta-san.

The door to the interior of the ward far in front of me slowly opened, and speak of the devil, Neo Furuara-san appeared. With his round body covered by a white lab coat, and with tobacco in his mouth, as naturally as can be, the door opened and he walked toward us.

I hurriedly tried to hide myself, but of course there was nothing between the door and here to be able to do that, and soon, I realized there was no need anyways.

Neo-san cynically smiled and said,

“Yo, Ishimaru-san.”

As for me, as for me who was supposed to be locked up in a basement, he gave me just a glance, and then he turned back toward Kouta-san, and toward Kouta-san, who

was supposed to be an outsider and an intruder, Neo-san bowed deeply.

"I was supposed to greet you **here**, but things happened much faster than expected. Please forgive my rudeness in belatedly welcoming you."

"I don't mind," Kouta-san answered calmly. "More importantly, please prepare something to drink for my dear friend."

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1) https://www.maths.nottingham.ac.uk/personal/ibf/some.html

2) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOEblmjfzAg

3) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PaRappa_the_Rapper

4) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goldbach's_conjecture

5) bootable business card

6) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariwara_no_Narihira

二日目（3）——偽善者日記

Day 2 (3)
Hypocrite Diary

0

I believe in God.

Because we've met.

1

It was one such possibility.

To begin with, why Kouta-san was able to invade this prison-like research facility so easily. And why according to the security guards the intruder had *already escaped the facility*, yet Kouta-san still remained within the facility bounds. There were other question marks regarding Kouta-san, and when it came to answer all of them, I had predicted to an extent that there must be a **double-dealer** within the facility, be it security or someone else.

However, I did not think the double-dealer would actually be one of the researchers.

While drinking a cup of coffee that Neo-san had filled with sugar, I observed him. I tried to be discrete about it, but Neo-san sensitively noticed my look, and laughed "fufu."

"What is it?" Neo-san said with an evaluating look and a condescending laugh. "Are you the type that dislikes

coffee? I have some black tea, then. I'd really like to recommend some alcohol, but well, it wouldn't be good to paralyze your thought given what's coming."

"..... I am not fond of alcohol."

"Right, Miyoshi-san said something like that didn't she. You downed a full bottle of vodka and got hospitalized for alcohol poisoning, was it? And you haven't taken a sip of alcohol since, or something."

So that instructor was going around spouting her mouth, after all.

"..... no, I like coffee. I actually prefer it black, but I do like sweet ones like canned coffee, too. Although coffee probably does not care whether I like it or not."

"Hahah. Right. It's rough liking them but not being liked back."

Neo-san grinned as he responded to me.

"I can't stand black. Absolutely can't. I wish I could exterminate everything bitter and hot from this world. If I were to ever become embroiled in a religion, the deity'd have to say coffee beans are impure and cannot be eaten."

".........."

The fourth floor of the fifth ward. Neo Furuara-san's private room. It was not created to look much like an academic's room, and instead, yes, it felt more like a room of a medieval noble, as befitting the man himself. A wine cooler, a luxurious sofa, what looked like a mahogany table, a chandelier hanging from the ceiling, and all four walls were covered with paintings. And those paintings were nothing ordinary either, being works that seemed like they would be found on a brochure for an art gallery. They were counterfeit of course, but they spoke words of his tastes.

“Hm? Interested in the paintings?” Neo-san asked. “Although it embarrasses me that they’re all over the place.”

Indeed, there seemed no relation among the paintings. Landscape to portrait to abstract, impressionist to cubism to surrealism, and even to automatism, anything went. I felt like he could even open an exhibit here if he wanted.

“Do you like paintings?”

“Although painting does not seem to like me back,” Neo-san smiled a bit happily. “Liking something and being bad at it, or what do they call it, a young monk can read sutras he’s never studied? When I was a student, this being around middle school, yes, I once tried to paint.”

“Huh,” I felt like his two phrases meant very different things, but I did not feel that pointing that out would lead to anything, so I let it slide. “So, how did that go?”

“Absolutely terrible. It was quite different looking and doing. I intended to draw a self-portrait, but my art instructor commented, *hmm hmm, this is, right, what is it, would it be, yes, an abstract landscape, it is quite, unique*.”

”.........” I could not laugh, having had a similar experience. ”..... and so you transferred to becoming a scholar?”

“Hahah. Don’t look at me like that. You looked at the Professor the same way, didn’t you? Scary, scary. Don’t you understand? I’m a friend, a friend. I even gave you coffee.”

“A friend.”

What was most important here was which side Neo-san was a friend to. At the very least, he is not the Professor’s friend. That is the truth. But to conclude that he is a friend of mine would be being simple-minded. And to say that he is a friend of Kouta-san would be jumping to conclusions,

too. From how the two interacted, I could not imagine there to be much trust between the two. I took a sip of coffee, and played with the taste in my mouth a bit before gulping everything down. I felt like my body warmed up from the inside out.

“What are you?”

“A direct question….. fufu. I shall answer that question like this,” Neo-san said as he stretched his arms out in a very old-fashioned way. “An expert at whistle-blowing! A professional at betrayal! A specialist of intelligence! A copycat of corruption! That is myself, Neo Furuara!”

”……….”

“Don’t slide away like that.”

“Of course I would slide away,” I slid away like five kilometers. “So in other words, you and Kouta-san are co-conspirators, and you two are spies from a rival organization or something that wants to snoop around this research facility?”

“A little different. Ishimaru-san and I aren’t really accomplices. Well, the two of us are more like aftermath associates….. that’s a bit tough to explain, though,” Neo-san seemed to struggle with explaining as he spoke. “It’d be better not to probe too much about me. Your lifespan’ll shrink if you learn too much, really. Well, isn’t it enough that I’m not really a person on Shadou Kyouichirou’s side, and more a person that’s able to help you out?”

”….. it probably is.”

Neo-san’s objective was probably somewhat similar to Kouta-san’s objective. However, as opposed to Kouta-san, who was acting solely on personal will, Neo-san seemed to be for some sort of organization… he seemed to be acting on behalf of some sort of organization set up in opposition

to this research facility or the organization above. In other words, the Kunagisa household. After all, Neo-san seemed to be plenty settled in and prepared – given that he is infiltrating as a researcher, and the timespan of his operation seems to have been much longer–, and by contrast Kouta-san was not as well-prepared but she had more maneuverability. It was probably that sort of partnership.

However, as Neo-san said, it was indeed probably better to act like I knew nothing of the two. Considering the lack of time, I did not have the composure to bother with organizations or research results or profits or things like that.

”– however….. you've caught the eye of quite a troublesome person.”

“Troublesome person? Do you mean Kouta-san?”

“Who else? It looks like dangerous people take a liking to you,” Neo-san said with bemusement. “Well, there was no helping it this time, but you should really let this be the last time you run into Ishimaru-san. I can't even begin to imagine why Ishimaru-san came to help you, but this is a warning from a senior. Fufu, do you think it's nothing to worry about? Indeed. Compared to the past… compared to when I first came into contact with her, Ishimaru-san's mellowed a lot. However, I know when she used to be called a Seven Spear[1)].....”

Based on what he said, I could imagine Neo-san and Kouta-san seemed to have run across each other before. In that case, it would mean Neo-san was not just any insider, and that Kouta-san was not just some sort of industry spy. I definitely wanted to avoid stepping too far into this topic, but at the same time, I do not know if I will be allowed to

avoid the topic. Because there was no assurance that this was unrelated to this Utsurigi case.

"Anyways. What're you going to do now?" Neo-san asked and returned to his other mood in a blink. "To be frank, this problem is on a class of its own. What the Professor was saying was absurd, but it's also the only solution that currently exists. Can't call it the most applicable, but it's not a bad answer for mollifying everyone. The security system is the biggest obstacle, after all. Card. Number. Retina. Voice. ID number. And then the log that's supposed to be kept in the mother computer. You're probably suspecting one of us, but that's a tough call, too. I still think an outsider did it. Then of course, they'll have left the mountain by now, so solving this within four hours would be impossible."

"– it's not a good show to intimidate a child."

There is no need to explain who the voice belonged to. All of a sudden, Kouta-san appeared, standing behind Neo-san with a bundle of papers. She truly left no presence. Neo-san seemed accustomed to this, as he looked unsurprised, asking without turning around, "Yo, Ishimaru-san. How long have you been there?"

"Beginning when you were giving a warning as a senior. Yes, let us engage in deep discourse over our difference in opinion regarding that topic at a later time, Neo-san. More importantly, dear friend, here."

Ishimaru-san first sat next to Neo-san, who sat across from me, and handed me a bundle of papers that she had been carrying. Unintelligible English and numbers were sprawled across in a mind-numbingly endless set of rows. No, this is not English. This is a programming language, or perhaps more accurately computer language.

“What is this…?”

“I went ahead and printed it out, just in case. The logs kept in the mother computer,” Kouta-san shot Neo-san a look. ”… Neo-san’s computer was so pitiful that it took me quite some time. ….. ahh, around there. The records from last night. The four-digit number records the time, and the labels next to it refer to the various research wards.”

I listened to Kouta-san’s explanation, and confirmed the logs while sighing. However, all this meant was that the Professor was not lying. Indeed, last night, no person other than Kasugai-san left their own research ward, and even that Kasugai-san only walked outside for roughly five to ten minutes. Given these records, the Professor Kyouichirou and the researchers all have an alibi. Using process of elimination, the Kunagisa Crew was clearly the most suspicious.

Things did not look well.

Hmph.

Process of elimination.

”….. how about the possibility these were tampered?”

“They can’t be tampered with,” said Neo-san instead of Kouta-san. “We don’t have such skills. This includes the Professor. Utsurigi-san might have been able to, but his specialization is different – he specialized more in the software side than the hardware side, after all – plus, Utsurigi-san was the one who was killed. Miyoshi-san and Kasugai-san work in different fields to begin with, and Koutari-san is more of a researcher than practical application. OOgaki-kun and Uze-san have pretty high skill levels but those lay in completely different areas.”

”– the others aside, would the Professor not be able to? He is the *Mad Demon*, after all. As long as his name is not

just for show, he should be able to do at least that much."

"Let's make one thing clear. Kunagisa Tomo is a genius. And Shadou Kyouichirou **is not** a genius. This difference is larger than you think, Mr. Lover."

"………"

"Yes, the Professor is not a genius. Of course, you… and myself, and our sort of level wouldn't be able to tell the difference between the Lady and the Professor. The two of them both look like geniuses to us. There are **only a few** human beings that can tell the difference between the two. And the Professor himself happened to be **one of those few** human beings. And wouldn't that be why, because the Professor realized he's not a genius, wouldn't that be why he diverged from the artificial intelligence research he'd been doing his whole life, and created this **idiotic** research topic?"

Idiotic research topic. It was probably so. However, if that were the case, then regardless of alibi, the Professor would have no reason to kill Utsurigi. There was no meaning in destroying your own research.

"Human beings are like that, you know, life forms that love looking down on others. Even though we all know that the world isn't fair and equal. Isn't that right? You could ask anyone and they'd answer the same way. It's a commonly-used analogy, but try asking someone, *do you think not a single person exists in this world that is inferior to you?* You won't find anyone that'll nod their head."

Neo-san seemed to be having fun.

Neo-san said nothing wrong. There is only one top, and the rest are countless bottoms. That is how this world is built. That said, it was not something enjoyable to hear.

"I guess we went on a tangent? But you know, there're

too many black boxes in this system. Not just the security, but including the mother computer. Black boxes. That means the only one who can dig inside is the original creator, the Lady of Kunagisa."

"… so we are not just talking about things not looking well," I tossed the papers on the table. "….. and when it comes to computers and such, all I can do is throw my hands up in the air. I do not specialize in them at all."

"Huh," Neo-san seemed amused. "Then, what is your specialty? You're Miyoshi-san's apprentice, so perhaps dissection?"

"….. I did not like dissection much. By the way, Neo-san," speaking of dissection. "What happened to Utsurigi-san's crucified corpse?"

"Hm? Ahh, exactly what you just thought. Oogaki-kun and Uze-san carried it to the third ward… to Miyoshi-san's research facility, and Kasugai-san and Miyoshi-san are performing autopsy on it together. Cause of death and time of death, and that sort of thing."

"I see….."

I thought. Information regarding Utsurigi's corpse. I definitely wanted to get my hands on that. In the morning, I was so surprised at what I saw after entering the room, that I cannot say that I was able to grasp any concrete information. And it was not like I had gotten a close look. That was why I must take another look at the brutalized and dismembered Utsurigi body.

And the other thing was that we could not forego investigating the crime scene. There was a need to re-enter that room where Utsurigi had been crucified and comprehend the situation. To re-enter that barren room with the blood message.

I needed to do these two things, however, I did not know how…

“More importantly, dear friend, do we not have a matter to be settled?” Kouta-san spoke to me while I was in thought. “Something that must be settled first and foremost, for as long as we are cooperating.”

“What is it?”

“Whether to prioritize you or myself,” Kouta-san raised a finger in a lecturing pose. “Whether you shall give me your **information** first, or whether I shall aid your true-seeking and then receive your share afterwards. The pressing matter of order.”

“Ahh…..” that is right. There was that problem. “That is a problem, indeed…..”

Of course, I would rather give my information afterwards. Not because of lack of time, but because it was my only wild card against Kouta-san. However, that was also true for her. Just because she were to aid me did not necessitate that I would hold up my end of the bargain. I had already turned down her offer last night, after all. It would be impossible for Kouta-san to trust me fully.

Perhaps Kouta-san thought the same, as we both fell silent for a while.

“How about flipping a coin?” Neo-san suggested to Kouta-san. “Time’s a wasting while you two stand around like this, Ishimaru-san. That’s no good for the boyfriend, either. And there’s no clean answer to that question anyways, so how about we just carelessly decide it with the even chance of a coin?”

”– I see. Consummate,” Kouta-san dug through her coat pockets and fished out what looked like some sort of medal. At the very least, I could tell it was not a Japanese yen, but

I could not deduce where it could be from, and it could even just be an arcade token. “Well then, dear friend, would you like heads or tails?”

“That is hard to call fair,” I said carefully. “The person throwing the coin can control the face of the coin. I do not mean to be suspicious, Kouta-san – no, I am being suspicious, but I do not want to relent myself to a system that someone with even normal hand-eye-coordination can rig…..”

“Indeed that is so,” Kouta-san said without hesitation. “Then you may throw it. I shall choose. Wouldn’t that fair to you?”

”….. are you sure? What I just said works for you, as well.”

“I have one more coin,” Kouta-san said, and then she pulled a second coin from her pocket. “We shall call it heads if you’re holding it in your right hand. Tails if it’s in your left hand. How is that?”

Kouta-san then flicked the coin into the air, and then she moved the coin back and forth between her left and right hands. I could not figure out where the coin ended up.

”….. alright, then.”

I flicked the coin lightly into the air. There were no mind-games left – it was entirely a game of chance. I did not catch the coin on the palm of my hand, and instead let it fall straight onto the table. The coin bounced a number of times, and then spun, and then in the end, ceased moving with the tails up.

Pascal2) says fifty.

To express it in more precise terms, it is not exactly fifty-percent because there was the chance the coin might stand on an edge, but that probability was so laughably low that

it was not worth taking into account, and it had already been avoided. I looked at Kouta-san again. She had a somewhat sarcastic grin as she slowly opened her left hand. Nothing was in her hand.

”….. very well. This is itself consummate. We shall prioritize you,” Kouta-san stood up from the sofa, and then looked down at me for a moment. “Then, as a textbook step-by-step for this sort of case, let us hear an autopsy and investigate the crime scene. Utsurigi-san’s body first, or the crime scene first. You shall decide.”

I answered Kouta-san’s gaze with my own and answered her question.

”….. indeed. Then let us – look at the corpse, first. The more time passes, the less information we will be able to get,” I looked at Neo-san. “Neo-san, do you know what room Utsurigi’s corpse is kept in the third ward?”

“Probably the seventh dissection room on the third floor. Because that’s what she said. Um, what’re you going to do?” Neo-san tilted his head to the side a bit as he asked. “You… or rather, you and Ishimaru-san have no means of entering that third ward, you know? The same way you don’t have a means of entering the seventh ward. I can house you here like this. I can give you a hand with thinking, and I can give you information, and I can even give you a cup of coffee. But it’s pretty tough for me to give you any more assistance. I’m in a pretty rough spot right now, too. You know that, right?”

”….. well, yes, I know that.”

What to do. The first thing popped to mind was to ask sensei for help. But that was too risky and did not come with a high chance of success. The worst type of gamble. I could not imagine sensei, that none other than Miyoshi, the

most self-centered in the world Kokoromi-sensei, actually worshiped Professor Kyouichirou or anything, but I also could not imagine that she would do anything to betray the Professor. She is incredibly talented, after all. She could not just be a normal hire at this laboratory. There must be some personal motive. And for that sensei who could not possibly live a life beyond her own whims, not one thing could exist in this world that she would prioritize over her own goals. To hope that a once-student of hers had any had any modicum of value to her was a vain, futile hope.

”..... in that case, there is only one way.”

Kouta-san said toward me, as I thought. And then this time, without waiting for my reply, she turned to Neo-san and said, “as for you, in any case.”

“Please bother the Professor. Please circulate unnecessary errands and counterfeit information as much as you can. Please confuse him to incredible and incredulous levels and muddle everything up. That is your area of expertise, is it not?”

”..... hahahahahah” Neo-san replied to Kouta-san with an airy laugh. “Roger roger roger, Ishimaru Kouta-san. I do not know why, but it appears Ishimaru-san has some reason to take deep care of this young man. What is that *information* you want so badly, I wonder? Very well, I shall not ask. It arouses my curiosity greatly, but I shall not ask. Yes. Leave it to me, Ishimaru-san. This Neo Furuara shall put forth the little everything and anything that I have to provide assistance.”

“Consummate. Then let us go, dear friend,” Kouta-san said with a smile that seemed very out-of-place relative to Neo-san’s wording, as she grabbed my hand and pulled me up from the sofa. “It is time to depart on an adventure.”

”….. you seem carefree.”

“Because it is not of my concern. For now, anyways.”

“Young man,” Neo-san said with a hint of seriousness as I was forcibly dragged away. “Be careful not to be seen by anyone. If you are seen, it’s over. Thinking that Miyoshi-san is alright because you are old acquaintances, or that you might be able to persuade Oogaki-kun, or any soft thinking like that should be thrown away.”

“I am quite aware, on that at least.”

“Not just the Professor. Every person here has a fallen quality to them. Of course, that includes myself as well. Right, be careful especially of Kasugai-san.”

”….. Kasugai-san?” I was a bit surprised by that. “Why? It seemed like Shito-kun and Misachi-san would be more warranting of worry…”

I felt like the two of them, who maintained respect toward the Professor despite being the recipients of such illogical violence made them all the more dangerous.

“Those without any conviction are the most dangerous, here. Think about it. Why did the Professor place you all - or rather, the Lady of Kunagisa, not in his own research ward, but rather in Kasugai-san’s? Of course, part of it’s so the blame doesn’t fall on him if you guys do manage to escape. But more than that is because there’s an **objective** belief that Kasugai-san would **never** betray the Professor. I can understand it, because I’m a professional at betrayal. Because I operate under the premise of betrayal, I can understand with absolute conviction. Kasugai-san won’t betray. Because they aren’t even **cooperating**, to begin with. Oogaki-kun and Uze-san have a reason for their adulation of the Professor. Respect toward the Professor, repaying of favors from the Professor, and so on. However,

that's why all you have to do is **provide them with more**. For example, you could wiggle yourself in while they have a bit of shock over their treatment from the Professor, or something like that. There're plenty of ways to get someone to turn coat. But Kasugai-san is different. The reason she's here is *just because*."

"Just because…?"

Neo-san grinned at my response.

"Yeah. Hey, can you imagine anything scarier? Can you imagine anything more terrifying? A human being that operates without any conviction and without any reason. She has no reason to adhere to Professor Kyouichirou. Not one reason. She's just here just because. That's why it's impossible to warp her actions. Because there's no reason for her to be assisting the Professor, so there's no logic that you can use to shape that. You can multiply zero with anything and you'd still end up with zero, and you can't divide from zero. What could you call this but fanaticism?"

".........."

Kasugai Kasuga.

I thought back on my conversation with her last night.

She said she would opt to *not choose*.

She who is nothing, without liking or hating or being normal or being pleasant or being unpleasant or being indifferent.

She who is nothing, *just because*.

But at the time, I did not truly understand what Neo-san meant. I definitely understood that Kasugai-san was warped in some way, but I could not imagine her to be that much of a threat. I felt like Shito-kun and Misachi-san seemed far more fitting for the term fanaticism, and I could not feel any fear at this point from the arbitrary phrase *just because*.

Kasugai Kasuga, *just because*.

Is that not an issue that did not need fretting over?

– but I would find out in these few hours. That a human being that had not an ounce of conviction could become an object of terror just by existing the way they are in the world. I would experience first-hand that there are no answers to someone who is not a problem.

2

And then Kouta-san and I returned to the rooftop of the fourth ward.

”..... what are you going to do?”

“Of course. You want to go to the third ward, don’t you? Then there’s a route, right there. The one and only route.”

Kouta-san pointed toward nothing but air. The space between the fourth ward and the third ward. I eye-balled the distance as roughly four meters… three and a half meters at the very worst. It was close to a meter, no, more than a meter longer than the distance between the fifth and fourth ward.

”..... jump, that? Again?”

“It is consummate if you would prefer not. It shall just be game over, as you please.”

”.........”

I stuck just my head out from the edge of the rooftop and looked down. Yes, no matter how many times I check, we were at least ten meters from the ground. I could say that with certainty because my eyes were both 20-20. This one was one of those times I did not appreciate my healthy body.

”..... it is at least three and a half meters, you know?”

“Even high school girls can jump that far,” Kouta-san said lightly. “An early-growing elementary school child can go four meters. Incidentally, the current male world record for a full-sprint distance jump is eight meters and ninety-five centimeters, the female record would be seven meters

fifty-centimeters. It is less than half of even the female record. There is no way you cannot jump that, is there?"

At the very least, please do not compare me to a world record. And while those people may have spent their lives jumping, they were not staking their lives jumping. The risk of dying from failure, or at least becoming heavily injured placed a greater burden on me than I would have expected.

"I do not think it a good idea to sit around in one spot for too long. And there's no saying that Utsurigi-san's corpse will be stored in the third ward forever. Once enough proof – by which I mean plenty of proof that works in the Professor's favor – it would not be surprising for it to be cremated. That would be the end. Yes, by which I mean not you, but Kunagisa-san. A dead end."

Bringing up that name left me with no choice. I mumbled, "jeez" in an exaggerated way, and then took my distance from the edge. This time, I took extra care and set up for twice as much running distance. That said, if I took too much distance and used up too much stamina by the time I jumped, that would not do, either.

"– leaving me side, can Kouta-san jump that?"

"Easily."

Kouta-san laughed with plenty of confidence, and pushed the rims of her glasses up. Based on her attitude, this was probably easy for her. In that case, I should just worry about myself. It would be alright, as long as I got enough momentum, there was no way I could not jump a mere three and a half meters. As long as I concentrated and made sure I did not step off the edge–

I took a deep breath and then took a step forward. My seventh step took me just before the edge, and I launched with my eighth. I arched my body like a bow – focused my

eyes on the sky – and without taking a second, soared through the air, and then, landed. I was able to land.

"– phew."

I turned around, toward the rooftop of the fourth ward that I was just on a few seconds ago. By the time I finished turning, Kouta-san was in the air. And she landed on the rooftop of the third ward before I could adjust my sight, and the momentum carried her laced boots forward by her heels, and then she stopped.

"—- fufu," Kouta-san maintained her slightly-bent-backwards posture as she laughed toward me. "We may be a surprisingly fitting couple. We must be the only pair in the entire world enjoying this sort of acrobatics together."

"I would not say I am enjoying this…"

I said, but I was bothered more by that my landing spot appeared closer to the edge than Kouta-san. She was tall, although not to the same degree as Suzunashi-san, and so her long legs may have been working in her favor for jumping, but this was probably not a case of build but rather athletic talent.

"What is it? We must hurry. You are short on time, are you not?"

"Ahh, yes…." but I thought of yet a different thing and froze in my place. "Kouta-san. Just a thought, but….. would we not be able to enter the seventh ward using this method, of jumping from rooftop to rooftop?"

Kouta-san looked surprised for just a moment at my suggestion, and then she quickly replied, "I think that's impossible." While it was not an immediate response, I could not understand why Kouta-san brushed that thought aside so quickly, so I could not help but sound like I were cross-examining when I asked, "And why is that?"

"I would prefer if you didn't get so excited over this, it's quite unruly. Were you like that when you tried to chew up Professor Kyouichirou?"

"That… no, I am sorry. I was rude, I apologize."

I obediently lowered my head.

Yes. What point is there in getting over-excited? Even if Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san's lives were endangered every moment we wasted like this, getting hot-blooded would not solve anything. Rather, the opposite would happen. It is because of the situation we are in, because of the position we are in that I must always have a cool head. I must be my usual, emotionless thought machine. Like a robot without a soul.

"However, what makes you brush it aside so quickly…"

"Do you think I hadn't thought of that? Jumping from roof to roof like Lupin III, do you think I've lived a life where I've not at least once resorted to such a course of action?" Kouta-san turned her back to me and headed toward the door while replying. "Anyways, it would be impossible for you to do that. I shall explain the reason a later time. For now, is it not more important to look upon Utsurigi-san's body?"

"….. alright," I nodded, not entirely appeased, and then I followed Kouta-san. "However, if this is impossible….."

I had felt as if I had finally come across the light at the end of the tunnel to this difficult case, but perhaps it was just a wrong hunch. For a moment it was like the completely, physically sealed-off seventh ward had shown just a crack.

Kouta-san opened the lock of the door and said, "but the problem is not just that sealed room, is it?"

"The reason that Utsurigi-san was killed in such a brutal

way. And the words written in blood pique my interest. If you focus too much on one thing, you'll stop being able to see where you're walking."

".…. indeed. That is true."

I looked at my watch again. There were roughly three and a half hours left. I could not say I had plenty of time left. However, the amount of problems to think about boasted an absolute superiority in numbers. To be honest, there is not much hope. However, as long as it is not zero, I must continue on. This was certainly a pessimistic perspective.

I walked down the stairs after Kouta-san, and then realized one more thing. It was unrelated to the incident, and was about the gamble with Kouta-san earlier. The front and back of the coin. It ended with my victory, but was it truly my victory? Kouta-san definitely had nothing in her left hand. However, that did not mean that the coin was in her right hand, because she did not show it. It was worth wondering whether both hands were empty. The thought that Kouta-san had passed the advantage to me because of my time limit felt so steeped in sentiment, however, that I could not bring myself to ask about it. Instead, I asked a completely different question: "What does Neo-san do?"

"Didn't you ask him?"

"I did, but I felt like he did a neat job of making things ambiguous. Or perhaps he simply parried me aside entirely….. he said something like being an expert at whistle-blowing and a professional at betrayal and a specialist of intelligence and other such aliases that sound like lies."

"And, what did you conclude of him?"

".…. well, I think he must be some spy from a rival

organization.”

“That answer is not consummate. It’s like saying *everything that swims in the ocean is a fish*, and indeed, I can only call it three-summate or four-summate.”

“Uh huh,” I did not understanding that grading scale. “Then, what is Neo-san?”

“This is just between the two of us, okay?” Kouta-san paused going down the stairs, placed her index finger to her lips, and then winked. “He’s not something as mellow as a spy. And all of his aliases that he used to refer to himself are not lies but rather the truth. Indeed, you could call him a plenipotentiary ambassador that an even larger group..... no, a circuit dispatched, someone several times greater than a spy.”

”..... I wonder about that large circuit.”

“That would be how scrutinized it is, the research Professor Kyouichirou is performing right now.... although Utsurigi-san passed away, so I should call it research **he had been** performing. Of course if he is to resume the research using Kunagisa-san then that correction is unnecessary. And that would be up to you. For example, the ER3 system you used to belong to is also probably interested in Professor Kyouichirou’s research results. Yes, of course that place would be.”

”..... and, yourself, too.”

Of course, Kouta-san seemed to say with her mischievous grin, and then she began walking forward again. I decided to avoid pressing further, and simply followed. We passed by the fourth-floor door, and then arrived at the third floor. Kouta-san waited for me in front of the door, and then taking care not to make too much sound, opened the lock with her knife.

“What room did he say?”

“The seventh dissection room.”

Kouta said as she turned the knob of the steel door and pushed it carefully, peering through the crack at the other side. However, she also then closed the door that moment. It was such an instantaneous action that it was like she did it out of reflexes, and it was astonishing that even then the only sound that could be heard was the automatic lock being set.

”….. what happened?”

“It is not consummate, as two women walked out of what is likely the seventh dissection ward.”

“Two? How did they look?”

“They both wore a lab coat. One wore round glasses, and the other seemed like the cool type.”

They were unmistakably sensei and Kasugai-san. The other woman would have been Misachi-san, but given what Neo-san had said earlier, and especially given that they were in lab coats, Misachi-san could probably be excluded.

Kouta-san crouched on the spot, and then placed her ear to the door. I had no reason to do so, but I did the same, anyways.

”….. …………… ya know ….. ”

”….. ………. the worst ….. … ”

”…..is….. hard word…..ya know.”

“It’s the usua ….. ….. bothersome….. ”

I could not really hear them. There was probably quite a bit of distance between here and them. However, I could slowly hear their voices better. That meant that they were walking toward us.

“But, even so. What’s the Professor thinkin’a’doin’ with the three?”

Kokoromi-sensei's voice.

"What he is going do it rather obvious I would think."

Kasugai-san's voice.

In that case, it seemed I was correct in deducing that the two Kouta-san said she saw were Kokoromi-sensei and Kasugai-san. I glanced at Kouta-san, who because of my posture sat right in front of me. She nodded back, and we went back to putting an ear toward the two's conversation.

"It is as forced a method as always. I think. I cannot think of it as an act of an adult with an academic background. I cannot think of him as having ordinary nerves considering that it is already savage to imprison such children in a basement and then to frame them as murder suspects on top of that."

"Pretty surprisingly normal opinion. Well, that's that, what ya'd expect of a *Mad Demon*, I guess. But I can't say I don't get the Professor's feelings. It happened right after the three of'em showed up, ya know? Regardless of logic, ya can't say they're not suspicious, yah?"

"Such suspicion is quite unlike you Miyoshi-chan. One of the three locked up in my basement cage is even your pupil is he not?"

Kasugai-san spoke of people like things.

"Wouldn't Miyoshi-chan want to cover for him? Speaking of which you were one of the first to stop him when he became infuriated."

"Ahh. Well that, ya know, came from experience. He's pretty calm most of the time but whenever anyone says something that hits in a bad spot, he starts rampaging. Most people who've staked their lives on academics, or ya know, most smart people're kinda like that, but he's a wee bit different. Anyways, he's always had a short temper.

Especially his first year around. I had to go in to stop him every time, ya know. What a handful of a student."

I had many things I wanted to say back, but I stayed silent.

"Well, that's what made him cute the way he's cute, ya know."

"Really? I've become a bit disappointed."

"Hmm? Whazzat, Kasugai-chan not fond of hot-blooded fellas?"

"I cannot stand hot-blooded men."

"Kasugai-chan's tastes are really strict, ya know. Well, I gotta agree that one's absolutely bad, ya know," what sensei calmly said rather harsh things about me, under the assumption that I were not around to hear, and then she continued. "But ya know, he's not just bad. Nah, he's pretty fundamentally bad, but his adaptability is bad, too, and he's also got bad potential, and his badness isn't half-assed at all, ya know. He's so bad that he's gotta be the first and last and unprecedented, the master of one and nothing at others, the type that you'd tell him to go right and he'll go left, an innovative level of badness. Well, not that I'm trying to praise him, ya know."

No worries, you're not praising me one bit.

"So he doesn't cause one bit of worry to Miyoshi-chan."

"Well, I'm not worrying, that's for sure. If anything I'm actually expecting him to do something. All we've gotta do is sit tight. While the Professor and Shito-kun and Uze-san come up with a countermeasure… and a countermeasure is all they can make, well, anyways, during that time, he'll probably find a way to solve this incident."

"Solve? He?"

"Yup. He's at his best in this type of environment… or

rather, ya know, he's the absolute best person for these situations. Nah, might be better to say this sorta situation is optimal for him. And to add to that, this sort of situation's his arch-nemesis. He'll make something happen and solve it, ya know."

"He is your pupil after all."

"Pupil. Captivating way to put it, but irrelevant this time, I'd say."

Sensei laughed and deflected that subject.

….. speaking of which, their voices were not getting closer or getting further, and it felt like they were just standing there, so I wondered what the two of them were doing. There should be no reason to stand by an emergency exit and talk, but if there were to be a reason, could it be that the two of them had noticed us? No, in that case they would not be engaging in idle talk, and would simply open the door. That they did not meant that they did not notice us.

Then I realized. When we entered the seventh ward yesterday while Utsurigi was still alive, there were stairs next to the elevator (that according to Shito-kun Utsurigi-san had let off on)). If this third ward was designed the same way, there should be an elevator shaft nearby. In other words, sensei and Kasugai-san were not standing in front of the door, but simply waiting for the elevator nearby.

In that case, this was a chance. The two of them would be leaving this floor soon. In other words, it would not be difficult to sneak into the seventh dissection ward to see Utsurigi's corpse.

Hmm, things were looking up for us. I may be lucky this year. Though we were already in the second half of June.

Though I had already been nearly killed several times these six months.

"Even so he is locked up in my cage. Optimal and arch-nemesis don't matter at all then. Or are you saying he's like Houdini?"

"If anything he's more the type to flip his thoughts around. He'll be like *I don't know. I don't get it. I don't get it at all. I don't get it so much and I don't get it so much that I'm going to die if I don't get it one more time but I don't get it after all so I'm dead* for the most part, and then because of something small, he'll be like *that's it! this is it! why didn't I get something so simple! I'm so stupid! So stupid so stupid and so stupid so I'm dead!*"

"So he dies either way."

It seemed I die either way.

"So he's not like Houdini. He's not a manipulator either, but he's not like a close-range power type, either, so ya know, yeah, I guess if he's locked up even he can't really do anything."

"How about an electric chair type? Then there is no point in hoping for anything," Kasugai-san said without any trace of emotion. "Well that's not something for us to bother thinking about anyways. We can just leave everything to the Professor."

"That again. Kasugai-chan always ends up there. *Leave everything to the Professor*. .... I don't dislike that part about you though, Kasugai-chan."

"What do you mean by that part of me Miyoshi-chan?"

"Leaving everything to someone else because you don't feel like thinking, not choosing to do anything at all."

I could hear sensei laugh, but Kasugai-san said nothing.

I remembered Neo-san's words earlier and paid even

more attention, but in the end, the two of them did not say anything important afterwards. They simply spoke about meaningless and hopeless topics, such as:

Ya know, I get that kokkuri-san[3]*'s written with a fox for the ko and raccoon for the ri, but what's with the ku?*

If I remember correctly it should be dog.

Why would ku[4] *be a dog*[5]*?*

Different way of writing it. The same way that you would write snake[6] *differently* [7] *in Ba Zi* [8].

Gotcha..... but isn't it odd that you'd have a fox and a raccoon and a dog?

The common link between the three is that they all appear in mountains in the wild.

So it coulda been a monkey.....

Or:

Ya know the phrase "adding insult to injury" gets used a lot, but if ya think about it, shouldn't it be "got insult added to my injury?"

Indeed "adding insult to injury" is usually used with the speaker as the victim. Perhaps half of it has been abbreviated similar to "cut the Gordian knot." As such the correct way should in fact be "insult added to my injury."

Hmm. Then ya sayin' it's like "catch them in the rye field?"

Speaking of which during my intern years I had a friend who'd studied abroad and he shouted "This translation is wrong! it's absolutely wrong! This isn't what Salinger meant when he wrote this! I understand how Salinger felt! I'll translate it properly for Salinger's sake!" and then he penned a novel titled "Catcher in the Rye Field."

How'd it go?

It was worse.

And so their conversation went. Come to think of it, the

two of them sounded much more passionate during their idle chat than they did when they spoke about the incident.

The elevator arrived, and I could barely hear the sound of the door opening.

“Well then I shall be heading on ahead, Miyoshi-chan.”

“Yah. What’s Neo-san want with Kasugai-chan anyways?”

“He said something about an emergency with the model skeleton he’s working on right now but it’s obviously a lie. However I cannot just brush aside the request of a senior. Although I would prefer to go back to my own research ward.”

“I see. Neo-san….. well, whatever, ciao.”

And then the elevator door shut, and I could feel the vibration of the electric motor.

I stood up at that timing, however Kouta-san didn't stand up. With her ear still on the door with a serious expression, as if the conversation between Sensei and Kasugai-san was still ongoing, she maintained that pose.

"........Kouta-san? What are you doing?" I asked in a low voice. "Even though Neo-san gave us a chance…… can you hear something?"

"I cannot hear anything."

"......then, what are you doing?"

"I cannot hear anything, dear friend." Kouta-san whispered again. "Why do you think so? From that conversation, Kasugai-san descended to a lower floor alone. Miyoshi-san is still on that floor. There is no sound. It is weird, isn't it?"

Having that much explained, I finally understood. We cannot hear anything. That doesn't just mean that we cannot hear the conversation anymore, there is no sound at all. Not even footsteps. In other words, even though

Kasugai-san left, sensei hasn't moved even one step. Why is Sensei still in the same place without any reason?

Why.

"Don'tcha think you can come out soon?"

With a voice big enough that even I who didn't have my ear stuck to the door could hear, Sensei said.

Kouta-san also seemed surprised by that voice and took some distance with the door.

"If ya run away and hide like that, it will make ya less of a man. My pupil."

"Sounds like a line I heard somewhere."

Kouta-san sarcastically scrutinized me with her eyes. I averted my eyes because of the embarrassment of my act being seen through.

We were noticed……. really? Did Sensei really notice our presence long ago? Knowing that Kouta-san was on the other side of the door, she exchanged that conversation with Kasugai-san? ---no, that's not possible. No matter what, Sensei shouldn’t be inhuman enough to sense people through an iron door. At the very least three years ago.

"Won'tcha come out? I don't really mind, you know. I will just go report it to professor. If I called wouldn't he come immediately? Won't he come at a speed equal to a race bike? Then wouldn't it be bad even for my pupil?"

Kouta-san questioned me 'What should we do?' with her eyes. Since I can't continue averting my eyes forever, I reluctantly said 'It can't be helped.'. Shit, even though it was just for an instant, I was stupid for thinking that there could be something like luck in my life.

"Kouta-san should return to Neo-san's building."

"---and leaving you behind?" Kouta-san shrugged. "I really can't think that you will be fine."

"I am already not fine."

It was the second time I said that line to Kouta-san. Accelerating, exponentially, I became more and more not fine.

"Teeeen! Niiine! Eiiight! Seveeeen!"

Sensei began to count down in a big voice. With a tone as excited as if she was welcoming the new millenium. I thought that a lot when I was overseas, but what kind of vocal cords does this Sensei have? You should dissect your own throat.

"Siiiix! Fiiiiiive! Fooour! Threeeeee!"

"Kouta-san. If I don't return in thirty minutes---"

"Understood." Without hearing until the end, Kouta-san agreed. "However, at that time the contract between you and me will be broken, so I cannot guarantee anything. For me, I don't mind if the one I have a contract with is Kunagisa-san. But for now let's keep that contract."

"Right. The wonderful thing about contracts is that it doesn't matter even if they are broken."

"You say a lot."

Then, Kouta-san handed that knife to me, and asked 'Do you understand how to use it?'.

"Yes. I used one in the past."

"That is consummate. Then."

When I received the knife, Kouta-san nimbly rushed up the stairs. After confirming I couldn't see her anymore, I inserted the blade in the door lock hole, and spun it two, three times. Soon the sound of the lock being unlocked.

Pulling the knob, I came out to the other side.

"Twooo! One! Zero! Minus---"

"Why do you continue after zero?"

"Oyo."

Confirming my presence, Kokoromi-sensei stopped her loud voice.

"---what? So ya were really here. Kokoromi-sensei is big surprised."

"..........." So it really was a bluff, you bastard. "Hello, Sensei."

"Hello. ....oops, that reminds me we haven't been alone together since that hospital room, my pupil."

Sensei pulled up her glasses with her hand, then smiled mischievously. More than mischievously, in a ill-meanned manner, if a cat tormenting mouses had an expression, it would surely look like that, that kind of smile.

A kind of expression only forgiven for girls before their puberty.

For example like Kunagisa Tomo.

".......haha." Seemingly not being able to endure it anymore, Sensei began laughing. "Hahaha! Hahahaha.......... hahaha! Good. You are. Really, good. Truly a deeply interesting character. If your brain was a little bit better, you would surely have done better...... or maybe if it were a little bit worse?"

"Sensei. I have a request."

"Hmm?" Sensei tilted her head playfully. "......... ya're awfully honest. Kokoromi-sensei is big surprised, for the second time."

"Could you not tell anyone that you met me?"

"Yes. It's okay." Sensei easily agreed. "I won't be too cold. Isn't it between you and I?"

"................"

To Sensei's words, I had no choice but to be careful. Normally I would be relieved here. I would have to bow my head, and thank her like 'Thank you very much.'. Even I

know that much manners. Maybe I would have to be moved by that affection. However the opponent is no one other than the great teacher Miyoshi Kokoromi. She is not soft enough that this paradigm would work.

"Alone---"

Without even trying to understand what I was thinking, Sensei said something sounding like talking to herself. Crossing her arms, with a pose like she was thinking, sometimes looking at me.

".......no, maybe two. Yes, the skeleton is two people."

".......?"

"Three would be perfect...... but that shouldn't be the case. If ya have that much ya would have to wander around, and being too many would be a problem......."

"What are you talking about? Sensei."

"Unya unya. What, who Ii-chan's cooperator is among this facility." Sensei returned her wrists and created the shadow of a fox. "At the very least there is one to open your cage. Since it's impossible for Kasugai-chan......, who can it be? But just that would be lacking...... so maybe two?"

"........I would want to praise your deduction, but it is absolutely completely wrong. Sensei." I confidently put out a front. "Everything was by my own power. In reality I had supernatural powers."

"That's the first time I heard that."

"Sensei was the first one I said it to. It's a secret between us, okay?"

"Well it's fine. I won't ask what ya don't want to say. For now."

Saying that, Sensei flipped her white blouse and began to turn her back. It looks like I couldn't fool her. Sensei stopped after walking about five steps and said "Come.".

"Didn'tcha came to pay respect to Utsurigi's body? My pupil."

"......"

"Don't be so wary. It's not like we don't know each other."

"If we didn't I wouldn't be so careful........"

"You say skillful things as usual. Hahah."

Not answering to my sarcasm at all, she continued to walk. That being said, Sensei was short so her steps were small too, so even my timid steps were not so far behind. With a stature not inferior to Kunagisa, next to Suzunashi-san far from an adult and a child, it is more of a giant and a midget. No, this doesn't matter for now though.

Sensei stopped before a door with a plate with written on it 'Seventh Experiment Room' (furthermore the writing was so dirty that it was barely visible. As long as it wasn't created by a preschooler, without a doubt Sensei did it.), then she turned back to me, and said "In the first place.".

"In the first place what is a genius? My pupil."

".........a difficult question. Let me see, to answer that question we must first think about what a genius means."

"Are ya Descartes?" Sensei inserted a retort of philosopher."Also there isn't any difficult question. Though there are difficult answers."

"A line I heard a lot."

"Exactly. In the first place it is from the best luck of the law of big numbers. Geniuses are not raised, they are born--- that's tha line of Fraulein Love, but don't ya think it fits perfectly? For you, the boyfriend of Kunagisa, you should understand that well." Sensei narrowed her eyes. "---haha. Ya were noisy about that in that school, about what she did. Well, you don't matter anyway though. So what's your answer?"

"I don't know, that kind of thing." Still not understanding, I gave a non-answer to Sensei. "Genius are basically smart people or skillful people, right? I think that is enough commonly."

"Commonly?"

"If you are not satisfied should I correct it to ordinarily? In the first place I am not a genius so it doesn't matter how I define it."

"You say that, but for those geniuses--- Kunagisa-chan, professor, Utsurigi or anyone is fine, but--- for them it is normal, they couldn't care less about the definition of geniuses."

"Sensei, what are you saying?"

"Nonsense. Of my own taste." Turning the knob, Sensei pushed the door. "Then, welcome to my castle."

A dim--- no, completely dark room. Since there is no windows, no light comes in. Sensei entered the room without turning the lights on. Since I didn't know where the switch was, I followed her while being careful to my steps. The faint light coming from the hallway was useful, but for some reason (maybe just simply the hinge being tilted), the door closed on its own, and true darkness enveloped the room. Everything, me included, became jet black.

"Wait--- Sensei? Sensei? Where are you?"

No answer. But there is a presence. Somewhere not far from where I am, I can hear Sensei breathing.I don't know what's her objective--- but if she is the Sensei I know, that objective is certainly evil--- it seems Sensei didn't intend to answer me.

I advance relying only on my instinct, but of course if you set aside the bad feelings, I was extremely dull, so I hit something within three or four steps. From the height it

must be a table, however it was not supported by legs but by a stand. So it may be an operating table, or---. After feeling a bit what was on the table, I touched something soft and solid. It didn't have any elasticity, but it felt like jelly. What can it be? That exquisitely warmness……. ah, I have a guess.

It didn't have anything to do with my guess, but at the same time the light of the ceiling turned on. It seems Sensei pressed the switch. And as I thought, in front of me there was a big autopsy table, on that table, on the tip of my arm, Utsurigi's naked body was enshrined. No, since he was facing upwards enshrine is weird, but in this case the choice of word didn't matter.

"……………."

Utsurigi's body was, probably by Sensei's hands, patched in some places. His shredded torso and stomach was sewed together, his opened mouth was forcibly shut so I couldn't see the wound inside. There was nothing that could be done to fix his eyeballs and eyelids, both were gouged out which offered a creepy sight. Compared to that inexpressive face, his severed arms were much less creepy.

Good grief. It's hard to think this was the frank Utsurigi. There isn't even a sign of that, is there?

"I guess it's as expected that you didn't even raised a scream." Sensei who had turned behind me before I knew it said as she approached my back. "As usual, despite being cute you're not lovable."

"And as usual you have bad taste, sensei." I took my hand off Utsurigi's body and turned towards Sensei. "What meaning is there? For this action."

"There's no meaning. There is just an action. For everything."

"Don't try to dodge the question. I don't get what you are saying."

"In other words, a clockwork orange."

"I don't get it even more."

"It's what is commonly called a metaphor, my pupil." Sensei turned around the autopsy table and positioned herself facing me on the other side of the table. "More than a metaphor, a metaphor." (Tl : she just said the word in english this time)

"Isn't it the same?"

"Fufun. The belief there is completely different." Sensei said something incomprehensible. "Essentially a problem of assumptions. More than that, it's now the time for extracurricular lesson. Kokoromi-sensei's dissection lecture is starting. Now, my pupil, comment your impressions upon seeing Utsurigi Gaisuke's corpse."

"Hmm. Let me see, from just seeing, umm, he is dead."

"Failure." As expected the evaluation of the dissection specialist was harsh. "For my failure of a pupil I will change my question. This, what do ya think was the cause of death?"

"An hemorrhagy cause by excessive bleeding, isn't it? Sensei, didn't you say that yourself?"

"However that was wrong." Sensei was tapping Utsurigi's cheek with her fingertips. "The cause was brain destruction."

".......brain destruction? What do you mean? Is it like a cerebral contusion?"

"Wrong. Brain contusion refers to when the brain is damaged by an external wound. Look, the scissors are shoved in, aren't they?"

Saying that Sensei made a peace sign, of all things she

inserted those two fingers in the cavity of Utsurigi's eyes. Does that person have no respect or sympathy towards the dead? She probably doesn't.

"And that was pretty deep. It was stabbed to the root, do you remember? The blade passed through the brain and reached the thalamus."

"Well, I could guess that the blade reached the brain by just looking, but Sensei, then...... wouldn't that mean that there's a possibility it was stabbed by the scissors not when he was dead, but when he was still alive?"

"Not just a possibility. The first ever wound was the brain destruction by the cissors. Thrusting the scissors frantically and sloppily turning it around. For ten seconds, or five seconds."

It was a story that made me hurt just by listening.

"Having his stomach shredded, his legs broken and his arms cut was after his death. There is the reaction of a living body, you understand, right?"

"---you know I was bad at human dissection, don't you?" I said without letting Sensei nor Utsurigi enter my field of vision. "In the first place, seeing a body that destroyed...... there can't be any sane meaning."

"Then why did ya came here?"

"I am searching for a trigger for inspiration. Since it is reverse psychology. Ah, no, was it electric chair style?"

"Now that you mention it. Then the kind Sensei will explain it to ya. I will temporarily stop asking questions and receive yours."

To Sensei's words, I couldn't help but step back. What is she planning? What in the world is she plotting? I was certain that she was planning or plotting something, but that being said I would step back. In this room only lighten

by artificial light, it feels like time has stopped, but even now seconds after seconds were passing.

Only three and a half hours left.

"---the time Utsurigi-san was killed?"

"Today at just one i the morning." Sensei answered immediately.

"Is there no error in that estimation?"

"My instinct has no errors."

So it's instinct?

"Even if the instinct part is a joke, well, around one o'clock. Around the time Kasugai-chan and ya met."

In other words, it was impossible for Kasugai-san to commit the crime. None other than me is the witness. The only one who came out last night (though it was for a short time), Kasugai-san has an alibi, so it wasn't a fun development for me.

"Is it really true? isn't it some harassment against me?"

"Do I look like someone who would do that?"

"Do I have to answer? That question. Also, Sensei, even if that is not harassment--- maybe you are just following what the professor told you."

"The professor, huh........ you really are a doubtful person. Well, it's fine." Sensei answered just that to my doubts, without affirming or denying. "Anyway that's fine for the time estimate......., but the weird thing is after that."

"The weird thing?"

"His stomach and torso were shredded just after his brain was destroyed. That's why there was so much blood, but...... the arms."

Splat, Sensei hit the part where the arms were severed. She really does terrible stuff.

"These arms were cut off a few hours after his death. So he was crucifixed--- even after his throat and legs were crushed."

"......? What about it?"

"It's weird, isn't it? Why did they have to cut his arms at a different time and put him up for show? They should have done it directly after killing him. But there's a time lag between the time of death and the time of time of crucifixion . Then, the culprit stayed for a long time on the scene for no purpose, didn't they? Why would they?"

"Why would they, you say……."

There is no way I would know that. Far from that, I don't even understand how that is a problem. Of course there is a difference between when he was killed and when the arms were cut off, but is there any reason for that difference to be several hours?

"Maybe it simply took a long time to destroy the other things? If you're talking about that, I am more interested as to why was the stomach shredded, why were the arms cut off and why was he crucified. More than the problem of time, isn't this important?"

"There is no reason. Because there is just an action." Sensei repeated the same sentence as earlier. "If there is a reason, sanity isn't a problem. It's not that if there is a reason, no matter what you do it's not a sin. It's just that if you commit a sin without reason, the punishment is huge. In the first place, there is still the question of why did they kill him, isn't is?"

"A reason for someone to kill…… I certainly thought that Utsurigi had reasons to be killed, but……"

"I thought I taught you in class, didn't I? The reason of killing someone emerges simply from interests or

primordial lust, so you could say it is sane."

"Ah, thatanos, I see."

"It's thanatos, fool. What kind of villain would thatanos even be?"

"It's just that the alignment of syllables is hard to remember……."

The word thanatos that sensei talks about, in this case, roughly speaking, it is "I want to try dying once, but since I don't want to die, I will have other people dying in my stead"(really roughly), something like a common instinct of living things. Although I don't think it fits in this case.

For example, taking the dismembering killer as a representative of the reasons for destroying corpses, it would be a wish of domination against the opponent. That was the case for last month. Hurting a prey who cannot move as much as you want, dismembering them, collapsing their form. There is no other situation where you dominate the opponent more. About Utsurigi being crucified, if the culprit was someone with a strong craving for limelight, that may be the reason of hurting Utsurigi's corpse so much.

"......even then there is something strange, Sensei."

"Um? What?"

"Let's say this cut up corpse is fine. The arms being taken away too. Let's set aside the timing for now. I don't understand the reason about that part. However there is something I understand even less. The arms the culprit took, just where did they bring them?"

"--that's there."

As if saying 'Well noticed.', Sensei laughed boldly.

"Right. At the scene--- I mean the seventh building in its entirety, they weren't anywhere, Uturigi's arms. The left

and the right arms. Unlike the eyes or the stomach, that was not just to hurt it. The culprit took them away. For this, I can't really say 'No reason, just acts'."

"................"

Listening to Sensei's words, I looked at the spot Utsurigi's arms were severed. The flesh exposed to the air already turned pure black. I wonder if Sensei cleaned it, the blood was cleanly washed away, though it didn't change its gore aspect.

"Why would them take something heavy like arms……."

"Want to test thinking about it romantically?" Sensei raised her index. "Utsurigi's hacker skill was first rate. The culprit was jealous and kill Utsurigi. Cause jealousy is one of the most common causes for crimes. The feeling of wanting to hurt someone emerges from the worries of the other person winning over you……. or maybe from belief being born from an complex of inferiority. But jealousy is a sort of envy. The culprit was admiring Utsurigi and was idolizing those arms of Utsurigi. Therefore."

"Therefore he took those arms as a memento? It's not Milo's Venus." I grumbled some nonsense to Sensei. "Let's think a bit more seriously, Sensei."

"The one who must think isn't me but ya, right? I'm not concerned aaat aaall."

It was a childish way of saying it, but she was right.

Having no other choice, I did was she said. A reason….. a reason to cut the arms and take them away, huh…….

"First for the candidates, I think the fetishes are important."

"Then it wouldn't change from what I said."

That too, was exact.

I should think a little more seriously.

There is an infinite number of interpretations for why they took those arms, or at least a number close to infinity. Although Kunagisa could cover all of those, it is impossible for me. Adding to that, I am repeating myself once again, but I don't have time. Then, I have no choice but to think arbitrarily. Essentially, like a mystery novel with heroism and logicism, let's assume this phenomenon is a hint leading to the culprit. About the fact that they took the arms away, that they didn't just leave it at the scene, an inevitable reason for that would be....

"From this way of dying--- I guess cadaveric spasms."

Cadaveric spasms are a form of post-mortem rigidity. Mainly coming with a violent death. For example there are the words 'A drowning man will clutch at a straw', it refers to this death phenomenon. Just before death, if a violent, destruction and harsh pain accompanies it, the dead will clench at what they are gripping with unbelievable strength. Since it happens when the body's limiter is removed, it could reshape a weak metal coin.

If you are wondering what this means, even if the victim dies after this, releasing this hand is extremely hard. Even using something like a bench or a bar, opening the fingers of someone weak is still a highly complex task.

For example strangulation.

When the neck is strangled (in other words it is death by violence), let's say the victim unconsciously grabbed the button of the culprit's coat. Ripping the button away and clenching it in their fist. It becomes a proof unmovable by anyone. Because unlike post-mortem rigidity, there is no way to disguise cadaveric spasms. You can be sure not at 100 percent but 200% that what the victim has in their hand is something that was at the crime scene at that

moment.

So it is an extremely good proof for the ones investigating, but on the other side, it is a disaster for the culprit. They must avoid that at all cost.

Even if it means cutting that arm away.

"Certainly there was a case like that in the past..... the La Benshing case (TL : I can't figure out what this is meant to refer to), was it? Though I don't know much."

"I don't know the proper name either..... in that case, rather than than trying to open the arm of the victim, it is easier to take away the whole arm, isn't it?"

"But then ya would just have to cut the wrist, wouldn't ya? No need to cut from the shoulder."

"Isn't it just a camouflage? It would be too suspicious to just cut the wrists. I mean, the victim died from a blade stuck in its eyes causing brain destruction, didn't it? There is no more destructive and violent way of dying. It fulfills the conditions of cadaveric spasms. If we suppose that the button of a white blouse was ripped......"

That would be a motive sufficient to cut them. And even if there was no cadaveric spasms, maybe there was still something important on Utsurigi's arms. The culprit needed to take it away from the scene.

The crucifiction, the conspicuous way the body was shredded, it may surprisingly all be an attempt to camouflage the arms being cut even a little. Hiding a tree inside a forest. Hiding a forest inside a sea of trees. Isn't it just that?

"I see. That ritual-like blood writing would also make sense thinking like this. If it doesn't have any meaning, but is just for bluff. It's certainly incomprehensible, "You just watch, 'DEAD BLUE' !!", was it?"

"..............."

Mm. Perhaps Sensei doesn't know that Dead Blue(Verge of Death) refers to Kunagisa Tomo? I see, Utsurigi uses that word only when talking directly to her, so it's no wonder. Though the slang Cluster has took place.

"Even then, you." Kokoromi-sensei tried to change the subject. "Earlier you said white blouse, didn't you? If you give those example, does it mean that? That you think that the culprit is among the staff?"

"........well yes."

"Even that part doesn't change. Hey, you. Don't you think that in reality Kunagisa-chan, Suzunashi-san, or those two together could have commited the crime? ....oh, don't make those dangerous eyes. How scary. Kokomin is scared."

Who is Kokomin? I don't know that person.

"Do you want to say that I am soft for my relatives?"

"Aren't ya soft? Ya got in a lot of suffering overseas. Don't ya ever learn? Don't ya ever learn the lesson?"

"Rather, this is just convenient for me. My only reason to move right now is to save Kunagisa, so it wouldn't begin if I started doubting her."

"Is it not that it wouldn't begin but that it would just end? For anything it is simple to just end it." Sensei said in a sarcastic tone. "Look, hypothetically, if Kunagisa were the culprit--- if that professor's deduction was right, what are ya gonna do?"

"I don't want to think about it."

"Someday a time where you will have to think about it will come." Sensei pressing for an answer. "If you think that the current vague relation will continue forever, you are greatly mistaken."

"I am touched from the bottom of my heart by your

worries, Kokoromi-sensei. Even then, that part of you doesn't change."

"Um? What do ya mean?"

"The part where you talk like you know it all even though it's not your business."

"I think it's a thousand times better than a certain someone pretending to not know even though it's their business though."

Naturally, Sensei and I ended up glaring at each other. Invisible sparks were scattering around over Utsurigi's dismembered body. The first one to break that glaring was, of course, me. Sensei averted her eyes and in a small voice, "Sorry, I went too far.", she apologized.

"I will take that advice honestly. Yes, even I don't think that I will be able to stay like this forever with Kunagisa."

"I see. I guess so. That's how ya are. Even if you can see failure ahead, ya won't try to stray from that path, will you?"

"It's not something that cool. Essentially my brain--- no, my heart is bad."

"Heart, huh--- ihihi, like Magokoro?" (TL : Magokoro is written true heart)

"................."

"I see. Right. I feel like it's unnecessary but I was that's how it is. Isn't it fine....., look, I will go back soon. The professor called me. Ya can stay here as long as ya wish. Be at ease, I won't tattle on ya. Bye byekin." (TL : byekin -> baikin = bacteria)

Sensei went around the autopsy table then calmly passed my side. I grabbed the sleeve of that small white blouse and stopped sensei with that hand.

"........what? What ya wanna fight?"

"............................"

"If ya have nothing to say, I wich you would take that hand of and let me leave in a cool way."

"Sensei........ what is your objective?" In a low tone, without turning back, I said to Sensei. "What are you helping me? No....... in the first place, why did Sensei left the ER3 System to enter this research facility?"

"Can't ya trust me?"

"Frankly yes. I can't trust Sensei at all." I continued without putting emotions. "Sensei has no reason to help me if it meant putting yourself in danger, no reason to risk having to leave the facility you left the ER3 System, there is not even a fragment of one."

"You said a lot, thank you." Sensei laughed a little. "Don't talk like people are all heartless."

"At the very least I think you are an advocate of purpose."

"I see." Sensei, once again, laughed lightly. "A bit of a shame. Sorry to fail your expectations, but it's really simple. I don't have a reason to stay in this facility anymore. Because the old guy Utsurigi Gaisuke died."

"........? What do you mean?"

"Literally what I said. Didn't professor told ya? If Utsurigi died, everything would be over, he said. In reality it's exactly as he said. So, Miyoshi Kokoromi is not free enough that she would stick in a finished place."

"But it looks like professor doesn't intend to end it now. He will start again--- rather, he will continue."

"Right, using Kunagisa Tomo." Sensei said. "But ya think so too, right? That this is absurd, ya think so too, right? It's just a desperate alternate plan. It's just a makeshift alternate plan. Well, it's true that Kunagisa would fit better as a sample than Kunagisa though."

"............"

"But that would mean making his backing, the Kunagisa Syndicate his enemy. I don't get what he is doing. Professor seems to want to make a deal with the Kunagisa Syndicate, but it's not the kind of organization where that would work. Right? That kind of organization should be behind your back and stay there. Even professor should understand that. Even though professor should be the one understanding that the most. Or maybe Shadou Kyouichirou was depraved enough to have even forget that........ I am not kind enough to stay forever on a boat taking its heels. That's exactly as you said."

"So you want me to owe you a favor and this time have a direct relation with the Kunagisa Syndicate?" Sensei didn't answer. I was satisfied with her silent answer and freed her sleeve. Even then Sensei said nothing. I said nothing either. No one said anything.

The sound of the hinge opening, a few seconds later, the sound of it closing.

Then stillness.

In the autopsy room, only Utsurigi and I were left.

".....that, is it even nonsense, Utsurigi-san?"

I said so to Utsurigi-san.

Surprisingly, there was no answer.

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1) This is a reference to the Seven Spears of Shizugatake

2) Pascal's Wager

3) kokkuri-san note the explanation about the letters that comprise the word in Japanese. As a TL note, I kept this "topic" literal because I couldn't think of a better way around it.

4) 狗

5) 犬
6) 蛇
7) 巳
8) Ba Zi calendar

二日目（4）——死願症

Day 2 (4)
Thanatophilia

0

A human being without a weakness is more dangerous than a strong human being.

1

Kouta-san was sitting by the stairs.

I froze in position when I opened the third-floor emergency door of Miyoshi Kokoromi's third ward building with the lock-picking blade and turned the knob. And then about ten seconds later I was finally able to pronounce, "what are you doing?"

"I was being told that the person I was waiting for would not come," Kouta-san said nonchalantly. "It is not consummate."

"..... then I have just arrived. However, you were supposed to be headed toward Neo-san's research ward."

"If you think about it, Kasugai-san is visiting Neo-san's place right now. Returning to such a place is not consummate."

Kouta-san stood up and patted away at the dust that had latched onto the bottom end of her coat, which she had ended up using as a seat. And then she stretched her back

and cracked her neck left and right.

Perhaps she had been worried about me and waited there the whole time. That may have been the case, and there was also the same possibility that it was not the case. It was indiscernible. Either way, it would be the same possibility as a flipped coin standing on its edge. I said nothing and returned the blade I had borrowed to Kouta-san.

“So, did you achieve anything, dear friend?”

“Somewhat,” I closed the door behind me as I answered. “There was a bit of progress. However, that was all. I gained more information but I did not arrive at an answer.”

“Excessive information will simply get in the way….. well, so be it. If you may, allow me to hear.”

I did not think there was any reason to hide things, so I told Kouta-san everything, from the truths that sensei had told me about Utsurigi’s corpse to the idle talk between sensei and I. My explanation was lacking because I have a bad memory, but it seemed she was able to understand after just one explanation.

”….. the reason his arms were cut off.”

“Apparently the reason for dismembering a corpse is usually for convenience during transport or hiding, or hatred, or sexual desire. However, I think it is not entirely incorrect to reason that there must have been some cause to cut the arms off.”

”….. you appear to have said something like *we are not talking about the Venus de Milo* to Miyoshi-san, but what did you mean by that?”

Kouta-san asked me a question that I did not understand for a moment. And without understanding the intent behind the question, I simply answered, “No meaning in particular.”

“It is one of many theories that have been brought up with regards to the Venus’ arms. Kokoromi-sensei’s hypothetical reminded me of it, so I brought it up. That is all.”

“The theory about Venus I prefer the most is the default one, in which there were no arms to begin with.”

“Uh uh. What about that?”

“No, just idle chat. I’m just saying that regardless of how it comes about, the result is the finished product. The result – regardless of what that may be. Well then,” Kouta-san stared at me. “What shall we do next?”

“Next…..” I thought for a moment. “Let us go to the roofstop. There is no particular reason to stay here.”

“As you wish.”

And then Kouta-san fluttered her denim coat sleeves as she began climbing the stairs. I walked behind her. After climbing about ten steps, Kouta-san prefaced, “Along with idle chat, or perhaps as yet more.”

“Your teacher-student relationship is not distinct.”

She said.

“How should I interpret distinct?”

“It is a story about the ambiguity over whether there is trust. Although this is from my own perspective, in other words, being my personal opinion, despite all that you say and act, your attitude earlier belied certainty of safety. Somewhere, somehow you seemed certain that *sensei* would not warn the Professor about you, and would in fact even lend a hand.”

“That is a misunderstanding, Kouta-san. I simply had no other choice. Of course, the possibility of having things handled internally always existed, but it was still a dangerous bet.”

“That may have been the case, but it is hard to throw away the illusion.”

“Illusion…. there is a difference between trust and being absolutely certain of each others’ core behaviors,” I said curtly. “There was no one across the ocean that I got along with worse.”

“Across the ocean? You imply a great deal with that wording.”

“There is a fortune-teller that I get along with even worse over here….. compared to that, sensei is still on the cuter side. Anyways, that is how it is. The connection between sensei and I is as strong as the effect of the moon’s gravity.”

“That may be so,” Kouta-san quickly stepped back, as it seemed her interest was really just at an idle chat level. “Well then. There are now exactly three hours left for the time limit. How do you feel about the odds of triumph?”

“Unfavorable. It is like, please look forward to our next series.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nonsense.”

Come to think of it, I had once read a novel that had the premise of *please look forward to my next work*, and as I escaped from reality in such thoughts, Kouta-san and I reached the rooftop of the third ward. Kouta-san walked to the center of the rooftop, and then raised both of her hands in a banzai posture. Assuming she was not calling for a UFO, she was probably just stretching her back.

“All that said, the view from here is spectacular,” I said to Kouta-san for no reason. “A cryptomeria forest all around. It is enough to make me forget what I am to do. This must be what they mean when they say it steals your soul away.”

“I hate to ruin some poetic words,” Kouta-san said normally. “But what you see is not a cryptomeria forest. It is mostly oak.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Other than that, there are chestnut trees. There’s some pine. There are other types mixed in, but there is no cedar.”

“Is that so. Huh….. I had always thought all mountains had cedar.”

“That is an intense misunderstanding. Is your brain alright? Well, not that the topic of trees is any relevant,” Kouta-san turned to look at me. “Do you know what I am thinking right now, dear friend?”

”….. no. I do not know,” perhaps she was thinking of my ignorance regarding mountain trees. No, of course she was not. “What?”

“I am admiring a bit. At Miyoshi-san’s quickness at giving up.”

“Ahh…..” I nodded. “That is true. However you must agree that she is correct in doing so? Sensei is insightful when it comes to profits. She would not stay herself in such a place without having a reason.”

“Unlike Professor Kyouichirou, you would say?” Kouta-san said. “Professor Kyouichirou seems to have quite a villainous role to you. Although I do not blame you after such treatment. However, that cannot be helped. After all, character is like a bonus part attached to the well-off.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a heartwarming story about how human beings first become a good person when they have composure. But everyone’s quite pressed,” Kouta-san said cynically. “True geniuses like Kunagisa-san and Utsurigi-san can of course be kind to other people. It is like that proverb *if I were*

Edison I could have been called the King of Invention, too. Someone with a 10 billion does not feel pained in giving someone 10 million. Because even so, they are 9 billion 990 million better than the other."

"You are quite defensive of him. Even though you said this place was *like a graveyard*."

"My. You do know grave-robbers are the most profitable of professions?" Kouta-san boasted happily. "Well, in any case, *composure* is most important."

"Leaving Kunagisa aside – Utsurigi may have had plenty of composure, but he did not seem the type of person to be kind to others. He was the detestable kind that put all of his composure into being nastier."

"If one can be kind, one can also be unkind. Such is the bliss of those who can choose. After all, having these things decided for you without giving you any options is a tragedy. Don't you think?"

"I do not think it is a tragedy. Just sad," I followed up absentmindedly. And then I changed the topic. "Sensei seems to have decided to leave this place already, but what of Neo-san? If what Kokoromi-sensei said is true, then it means he no longer has any reason to continue being a spy? And ….. what are you going to do, Ishimaru Kouta-san?"

"That is itself a superfluous worry. The three of us, Miyoshi-san and Neo-san as well as myself, have our three different objectives, so there is no need for us to walk the same path. And, Miyoshi-san already abandoned this place, but – and I suppose that could be praised as having a splendid eye – my personal opinion is that the Professor's plan is not that bad. While I shall not say it has a high chance of success, it also does not have a low one. And the merit in the case of success - Kunagisa Tomo herself - is

unbelievably great. The risk has consummate value.”

“Although that bothers us greatly,” my voice had naturally become displeased. “Each and every one… is like a vulture. A sample, an experimental subject, a test body… really, are any of them human?”

“They used to be human. Before they became academics.”

Kouta-san’s sarcastic words sent a chill straight through my body. When it came to being inhuman, of those within this facility, was it not this one that was far and away the most befitting that term?

“Well, your *each and every one* may be counting myself. But that is also itself consummate. Well. In any case, shall we return to Neo-san’s place and come up with a strategy? Neo-san may have come across some new information, and it would be good to know of the Professor’s actions.”

”……….”

While I listened to Kouta-san’s words, I was facing the complete opposite direction from Neo-san’s fifth ward. In other words, I was looking in the direction of the second ward. In more precise terms, from here, I was visibly confirming the distance between here, the third ward, and there, the second ward. Kouta-san seemed to have noticed my look, as she walked in front of me and asked, “What are you thinking?”

“I wondered if it would be possible to go from here to the seventh ward.”

”….. I think I said it is impossible.”

“I have not yet heard the reason for that. And, from the way I see it here, the distance to the second ward is roughly two meters. Around the same distance as between the fifth ward and the fourth ward…… no, this one seems a bit

shorter. And then if I remember correctly, the next one, between the second and primary ward..... in other words the distance to reach the Primary Ward that houses the Professor, was not that great either."

"You're quite fixated...... would that not be more befitting desperation?" Kouta-san said with some bit of exasperation. "This is not consummate."

"Then tell me. By what reason is it impossible?"

I could not see the distance going from the primary to the sixth ward, and then the important sixth to seventh ward because of the angle from here. Is Kouta-san saying that the distance is an issue? I did not know. However, Kouta-san was much more familiar with this facility. I understood, logically, that there was no point in refuting Kouta-san's opinion when it came to the matters of *infiltrating* and *trespassing*. I understood, but.

"But, I cannot think of any other means of breaking into the seventh ward while avoiding its security."

"Then it would be best you didn't," Kouta-san said bluntly. "..... perhaps you may not understand through words, so I suppose you might as well experience it yourself. No action is wasteful to such a reverse-psychology person like yourself, and it is more wasteful to be standing here arguing."

Kouta-san said, and then she walked toward the second ward, and with legwork akin to avoiding a puddle, moved to the rooftop of the second ward. I could not help but admire her boldness even though it was just a two-meter distance, considering that just slipping would be the end of her life.

I followed Kouta-san and moved to the second ward. Kouta-san walked quickly, and she soon moved to the other

side, and then she waited for me. I caught up, and when I looked, the distance between the second and primary ward was three meters….. no, a bit less. Considering the air space between the fourth and third wards, this felt like nothing.

Kouta-san gave herself a bit of a running start, and jumped to the primary ward. It was readily apparent she was not giving it her all, and with a light flight, she landed on the rooftop of the primary ward. As soon as she landed, she turned around, and silently waited for me. This had already become the fifth jump, and even I had started becoming used to this. However, I have also heard that it is once you get used to this sort of acrobatics that things become dangerous. I kept myself focused as I jumped from the second ward to the primary ward.

”….. this is a heliport,” I mumbled with my toes pointed toward the big circle painted on top of the primary ward (which had a big *H* in the middle). "And a plenty large antenna…. despite its isolation, communication is not completely disconnected from the rest of the world….."

"Do you want to ask Kunagisa's brother or your acquaintance contractor now?" Kouta-san teased. "You may go ahead if you please. I'm sure they shall come helping immediately."

Kouta-san did not seem to pay it much heed, but that line seemed to insinuate that she knew Nao-san and Aikawa-san. Despite the suspicion, I decided not to pursue the matter. In retrospect I would think that I should have pressed the issue, but I am not deft enough nor superhuman enough to predict my own regrets. This is not yet the time for that, I lightly responded, and then I turned to the east. The fifth to primary wards were all lined straight, but the

sixth and seventh wards had probably been architectural afterthoughts, as they were placed to the side. I looked straight ahead to the sixth ward, and finally to the seventh ward.

"Professor Kyouichirou and the others," Kouta-san stared at the floor of the rooftop, as if she had x-ray vision, and spoke. "I wonder what sort of evidence they are collecting in preparation for what sort of method to set her… no, to set Kunagisa-san up as the suspect. Fufu, even if we were to succeed in infiltrating the seventh ward, there is nothing to be done if we were to run into someone altering the evidence."

"There is no point in such negativity."

"Indeed. Let us leave such matters to Neo-san. Although leaving things to others is not your preference."

Kouta-san gave an out-of-place smile and then walked to the sixth ward.

"Yes – wait, huh?"

There was nothing like an entrance on the rooftop of the sixth floor. According to Shito-kun the sixth ward was a power plant – what sort of power plant was it? A carbon power plant I think, or a silicon power plant. Or a nitrogen power plant? It was certainly one of those three, but I was not really listening, so it had become rather – vague, and it was not a place that people would enter and exit, nor would people hang laundry, so this should have been expected, but there was nothing like an entrance door on the rooftop of the seventh ward that I could see. Large water tanks were placed along the eastern edge, and there were some wide pipes connected to the tanks, but otherwise it was a clean, flat plain.

"Is this what you meant, Kouta-san?" I asked Kouta-san,

stunned. “In other words, there is no entrance from the rooftop on the seventh ward–”

“There is,” Kouta-san immediately responded. “Can you not see? How is your eyesight?”

“I have not had it measured recently, but I do not have any sense of it worsening, so it is probably around 20-20.”

“Then you should be able to see. About three meters toward us from the water tanks. A round, steel plug that looks like a manhole? It’s less an entrance and more an emergency exit, but we can enter the building from there.”

Indeed, as Kouta-san said….. or rather, once she mentioned it, I noticed that door (if it could be called such). However, in terms of distance, because the sixth ward was still in between, it was hardly visible. How good must Kouta-san’s eyesight be to be able to see such a thing so clearly? Her glasses must surely be fake.

“There is a separate reason for it being impossible. In any case, let us head to the sixth ward. It is easy for you to see up close.”

Said Kouta-san, and then she jumped from the primary ward to the sixth ward. The distance was probably one and a half meters. It was short enough that Kunagisa could probably stretch herself sideways and become a bridge (although that is quite a terrible thing to imagine).

Without giving myself a running start, I simply jumped over. It was simple, but even so I felt a bit of fear when I glanced down. One would say to not look down in that case, but one could also say that is a mysterious thing about the human mind.

“So. Now do you understand?” Kouta-san had moved to the edge of the sixth ward and spoke without waiting for me to catch up. “The reason we can’t use this route to get

to the seventh ward."

".........."

As I walked closer to Kouta-san, I gradually understood what Kouta-san said. After reaching around the center point of the rooftop of the sixth ward, I could do nothing but confirm her words. I had to confirm her words even if I did not like it.

"..... how could it be?"

Indeed, this would be... impossible.

The distance between the sixth ward and the seventh ward. Compared to the distance between the wards so far – two meters between the fifth and fourth, three and a half meters between the fourth and third, just less than two meters between the third and second, just less than three meters between the second and primary, and then the one and a half meters between the primary and sixth ward – this was on a different level. No, it was not really on a different level, but it was big enough gap that one could not be faulted for despairing and expressing it as such.

Five meters.

Five meters.....

"Is it not impossible?" Kouta-san repeated. "Now do you understand why I said we cannot use this route to enter the seventh ward, dear friend?"

"I see....."

Five meters. That distance was such that it would be reckless to risk a life trying to jump across. Not even reckless, but simply a suicidal action. I am not familiar with athletic records, but based on what Kouta-san had said earlier, the world record was eight meters and seventy-five centimeters. Let us call it nine meters. The distance between the sixth ward and the seventh ward was four

meters shorter. However, just as I had thought when she brought up that comparison, I maintain that it is preposterous to compare me to a world record. I am a Japanese, and my body is not particularly built. I am not as extreme as Kunagisa, but I am still an indoor person.

Five meters.

Truly, this is an unreasonable demand.

”….. well then, there is no point in remaining here any longer, so let us return to Neo-san, this time. There may yet be another route–”

As I listened to Kouta-san’s not-really-placating words – no, I was not even listening to such words, as I thought myself into a rut. I simply, thought. Yes, this is an unreasonable demand. Solid and unparalleled, completely and utterly impossible.

”———-”

But that is why.

That is why.

The crucified Utsurigi *Green Green Green* Gaisuke. Both arms cut off, both eyes and even the brain behind them destroyed, throat slashed out, chest and torso cut open like a dissected frog, both crushed legs pierced. That truly empty, colorless and stateless room colored into an ammonia-smelling reddish-black atmosphere, and then on the wall was literally – truly literally – a blood-written message.

The research ward that was locked by an impenetrable hard security lock, the sealed room that was too large. There was no record of anyone entering. There was no record of anyone having even left their own research wards. The crime was physically, theoretically only possible for one, the administrator of security, Kunagisa *Dead Blue*

Tomo, the leader and ruler of the *Team* and *Cluster* that rewrote the rules of Japanese cyberspace by fifty-five fold.

The *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility.

It was absurd. This was no usual incident. A crime so impossible that it left no space for argument, a murder so abnormal that it left no space for excuses, a phenomenon so paranormal that it left no space for retorts.

That is why. That is why.

That is why the answer to this incident must be psychological[1]. It is necessary. Not just the suspect behind this incident. I as the detective must also become psycho. I must be psycho. That is the premise of this logic.

A deep breath. Once. Twice. Thrice.

"..... hey. What are you thinking, dear friend?" Kouta-san said, suspicious. "I have a terribly bad feeling right now."

"You're on the mark."

The answer, from my position – toward the edge facing the seventh ward, roughly ten meters – I began running. I had no composure. I had no composure at all. I could not waste even a single centimeter of distance here. I thought nothing, I felt nothing, I forgot I was living, and I used every bit of muscle in my body. My brain had long since stopped functioning. Like a soul-less robot, it followed orders.

Not yet. I did not jump yet. One more step.

"You – idiot!"

Kouta-san's shouting voice, changed from the elegant mannerism she had been using, for the first time carried emotion – and the moment after the insults washed over me, I stomped down with my left foot. I felt something, like molecular atoms, coursing through the center of my body, like all my blood was leaking out, like my head was being

showered with liquid nitrogen. I had never experienced molecules coursing through my body or leaking blood or being showered with liquid nitrogen, however, probably, this was how that would feel.

In other words.

I was freed from everything.

I freed everything.

Unfettered.

This is dying.

This is dying.

This is disappearing.

This is vanishing.

This is ending.

Death.

Here. I can die. I can die. I can die with. I can die to. I can die it. I can die for. I can die too. I can die me. I can die of. I can die from. I can die more.

“That’s why you–”

Like a revolving lantern, I was reminded of a line that someone had told me.

”– should just die.”

Yes.

You are right.

2

……….

“Kusanagi? Kuginasa? What?”

“Kunagisa, it’s Kunagisa. K U N A G I S A, Kunagisa. And then Tomo, for friend. Kunagisa Tomo.”

“Hmm. I see. Kunagisa-kun. Huhhh, your head, it’s pretty cool.”

“You can call me Tomo.”

“Alright. Then you can call me Tomo, too.”

“That’s confusing. I’m going to call you Ii-chan.”

“Then I’ll call you Ii-chan, too.”

“That’s confusing.”

……………

……………………..

“That one’s like a baby bird.”

“Baby bird? What do you mean?”

“Do you know about ’imprinting’? They say when baby birds’re born, they look at whatever thing they see that moves first, no matter what it is, and adore them as a parent….. well, it’s a superstition.”

“Are you saying that your sister is like that to me?”

“Yeah. Now you’re Tomo’s one and only guiding post. You’re the one and only, irreplaceable. That makes me extremely displeased.”

“This is not any pleasant to me, either.”

“You’ve gained the right. The right to demand obedience from Tomo like a parent any way you wish. You’ve gained free ownership over Kunagisa Tomo.”

"There are parents in this world who are killed by their children, Nao-san."

....

....

"Don't you wanna die? Don't you wanna die, and apologize? Don't you wanna beg for forgiveness?"

".........."

"Then pray. Go ahead and pray. Cry, and beg for forgiveness, and pray."

".........."

"Like I once did toward Kunagisa Nao, plead to God or even Satan."

".........."

"If I'm to be born again, please make me a cat or a dog or something."

".........."

"A pig, a cow, even a monkey'd work. I wouldn't even mind being a bug. Just make it so I don't run into Kunagisa Tomo....."

....

....

....

I had lost consciousness for probably just a moment – truthfully an instant, just the instant that I had blinked. I was lying down on the rooftop of the seventh ward, on that unfinished concrete. Or truthfully, I was sprawled out there. I had probably failed at landing. My legs hurt a bit. However this was no doubt due to the impact of landing. In that case, the moment that I landed, because of the sense of security – or perhaps from despondency, I momentarily lost consciousness. I had subconsciously braced myself, and did not seem to be hurt in any hurtful way. Considering that I

had been beaten up by Suzunashi-san and Kokoromi-sensei this morning, this was by comparison just a meaningless, dull pain.

“Well then – I must have done something bad in a previous life…..”

I survived.

I was able to jump.

I chewed on that as I slowly picked myself up off the ground. Or tried to.

”– I am currently exasperated beyond all belief.”

Sounded the voice from right next to me, and so my attempt to raise myself was halted. There was Ishimaru Kouta-san standing still as she let the rooftop wind play with her denim coat, glaring down at me.

”….. huh? Hmm, but…..”

I turned my neck and gazed at the direction I had jumped from, in other words, in the direction of the rooftop of the sixth ward. Kouta-san was not there. In other words, unless this situation was not a dream that I was seeing in the moments before failing my jump, it meant that Kouta-san had also succeeded in jumping to this side. While the former did not seem particularly out of the realm of possibility (probably higher than the chances of a coin flip showing heads), this pain running along my body was unmistakably real. However, the phenomenon of phantom pain does exist in this world. I did not know for sure, so I decided to ask Kouta-san.

“I am living, correct?”

“It just means you aren’t dead,” Kouta-san answered coldly. “Because things that hurry to their deaths for no reason cannot be called living.”

“I see…”

This time, I was able to finish getting myself up, and stood. Muscles, bones, ligaments, all green. I imitated a few stretches while I said to Kouta-san, “Did you jump across too?” Kouta-san did not answer. She just sighed.

“It may have been a failure on my part to choose you as a partner,” Kouta-san said. “I did not think I would have to tag along with such recklessness. It is not consummate. Not consummate at all.”

“However, now we have proven that you can jump from the sixth ward to the seventh ward – in other words, that it is possible to move across. All is well, Kouta-san. This means there does exist a route to the seventh ward, and that the sealed room state has been lifted–”

In other words, there is no longer any reason to absolve the researchers from suspicion. I had proven with my body that there was no need to bother with the one and only entrance, because one could infiltrate the seventh ward by jumping across the rooftops. There was no need to leave records of leaving your own research ward, much less records of entering the seventh ward.

Of course, all this proved was that anyone could be the suspect, and so it still left the suspect at large; however, at the very least, there was no longer any reason to suspect Kunagisa Tomo alone – or should I say no longer any just cause for this situation.

“There’s no talking carefulness with you and your way of thinking, is there,” however, Kouta-san’s voice remained cold. It seemed she was extremely irritated at my going off on my own. “And all is well, on top of that? You make me laugh. I can’t stop laughing, really. Perhaps you should get Kokoromi-sensei to dissect your brain once? It’ll surely boast a different set of construction from other people.”

“That is quite harsh of you… well, I will apologize over going on ahead on my own, but because of it, we were able to prove that what was supposedly impossible is actually possible, so is it not all good?”

“Does your normalcy not include allowing others to finish? When, where, and how did I ever say *jumping from the sixth ward to the seventh ward is impossible*?”

”……….?”

Kouta-san’s behavior finally made me feel doubtful – or rather, finally began to feel something like uneasiness. Indeed. To begin with, when it came to absurdity, this Ishimaru Kouta-san was doing something far more absurd. Infiltrating this research facility by coming right through the front door using the *Zerozaki* surname, being acquainted with the treasonous Neo-san, and despite having a reason for it, helping myself and Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san. The risks she faced were incredibly high. To insinuate that Kouta-san to think this – despite the possibility of death, this – level of danger was any obstruction was insulting enough for her to be miffed, is it not?

Then….. **there is something else**.

I thought that much, – I finally thought that much, and realized. I realized it. Right. A five-meter jump should be impossible for myself, given my lack of any training. Then why did I attempt it after calculating the odds? The reason. The reason that I had recognized, subconsciously.

I looked back at the sixth ward once more.

And then.

”….. ah, crap…..”

I see.

So that is why.

So that was why, Kouta-san.

I understood. I understood, completely. And then I felt exasperated. At my own personal idiocy, and at the *reason this route is impossible*, as stated by Kouta-san.

“It is not a hobby nor principle nor style of mine to bother people about what they’ve already done,” Kouta-san said coldly, behind me, “But please understand that we are now in an extremely tough situation, dear friend. If you are to go off on your own again in such manner, I will have to reevaluate our alliance.”

”….. indeed…..”

I nodded, and confirmed *that truth* again. I confirmed again because it could have been my misunderstanding. And then I confirmed that it was not.

The sixth ward was built **slightly taller** than this seventh ward. Or rather, the seventh ward was **slightly shorter** than every other research ward. From the sixth ward it was difficult to tell, but from this side – from the shorter side, it was clear that the roof of the sixth ward was slightly – even so it was still some tens of centimeters – closer to heaven. Then, what would that entail?

In other words, it means **jumping from that side to this side** becomes easier. Even if it were five meters in a straight line, because of gravity and jumping angle, I would get some tens of centimeters worth of assistance. That was why I succeeded in jumping. While it sounds nice that my cornered mind unleashed the full power of my body, this sort of realistic explanation felt more sensible.

Now, as for the jumping from there to here being easier this time. As opposed to the other research wards, what was meant by this seventh ward having a different height.

”….. **we cannot go back**.”

I mumbled.

I did not want to mumble, but I did.

“Correct, dear friend,” Kouta-san dealt a finishing blow. “That is the reason for this route being impossible. In other words, this seventh ward, which was probably built after the fact, is the only one in this facility that has a **different height**. The sixth ward is taller. Yes, if you were to return to the sixth ward, I would guess you would need to jump about seven meters?”

”.........”

“If you still want to try that, please, don’t mind me.”

“I will pass.....” I took a step back, and then I could not help but fall down on my butt. ”..... crap..... I was an idiot, Kouta-san.”

“It is consummate if you understand. Most things can be forgiven as long as they are apologized for,” Kouta-san shrugged her shoulders, and then finally removed the ice from her voice as she spoke in a brighter tone. “And I recognize that my withholding information was one such cause for this turn of events.”

That was true, too. If she had not explained it as “you’ll understand if you see” and simply stated “the seventh ward has a different height, so you can go to but not back from the seventh ward,” this would have never happened. However, at the same time, this was still my fault for not understanding despite *seeing*. The only excuse I could offer was that blood had rushed to my head.

“In the end, the sealed room remains a sealed room.....” I mumbled with despair. ”..... however, maybe, one of the researchers has tremendous physical attributes?”

“Even if there were, it is not consummate, dear friend. There is, after all, one more reason that I stated this route

was impossible. Do you not remember?" Kouta-san spoke. "Last night, when we met – it had begun raining?"

"Rain.....?"

I looked at the flooring on the rooftop. It was mostly dried, but indeed, there were still puddles that had been formed by rain.

Right. Rain. **It was raining last night**.

"..... ah," why did I just realize that. "Ahh....."

"With Miyoshi-san's estimation of time of death being around 1 in the morning..... well, let us say they were able to get from the sixth ward to the seventh ward. However, didn't Miyoshi-san also mention? The arms that were cut off were for some reason **several hours later**. In other words, the return trip.... after killing Utsurigi-san and then finishing the beautification of the scene, when they began returning to their research ward, would it not have been under rain?"

If that were the case, then what would happen. Simple. There is no way someone could perform the same feat in rain as without. And of course, they would not be able to beat their record.

I was careless. Too careless. If I had been even been able to remember that it had rained last night, I would not have been surprised by this route being deemed impossible. In the end, I am just a helplessly foolish idiot. I rushed, rushed, rushed, and then rushed myself into an irreparable act. Perhaps this stupidity could not be cured till death.

"What shall we do....."

Rather than solving the sealed room, it had gotten even more sealed, and furthermore, we had become trapped within our own sort of sealed room. Of course, we did not have a card nor a registered ID nor knew the keycode nor

had set up the vocal and retina check, and neither Kouta-san nor I had administration privileges like Kunagisa, so it would be impossible for us to break out through the front. At the same time, just because it was shorter than other research wards, I was not suicidal enough to ponder jumping off the rooftop. I did not know how it would go for Kouta-san, but at the very least she did not seem to have any wings. And this building had no windows. We were, in short, trapped.

"Two hours and forty-five minutes remain. We do not have much time to think," Kouta-san eventually said. "In any case, how about going into action? We can think about later some other time, so how about taking our infiltration into the seventh ward as a blessing – unfortunately it is debatable whether it should be called that rather than a curse – and check the crime scene, dear friend?"

"..... you are optimistic."

"Because it's not my problem."

Kouta-san said, and then she began opening the manhole next to the water tanks. Either due to rust or due to being set tightly to begin with, it did not open easily. I helped, and in the end, we were able to open the steel lid.

"There is no need to be so crestfallen, dear friend. There may be some strong rope in the seventh ward. There is nothing to say that there isn't rope strong enough to carry the weight of a person. In that case, we would be able to escape."

"Do you think there is?"

"Not at all," Kouta-san's placating was half-hearted. "Now, let's go, dear friend."

Regardless, that was all I could do. We climbed down the steel ladder and infiltrated the seventh ward.

3

Thirty minutes later.

Kouta-san and I stood in the tremendously odorous Utsurigi Gaisuke murder scene without sharing a single word as if we were simply, simply, obligated to be here for some purpose.

Kouta-san leaned her tall physique against the wall next to the entrance, arms folded, and closed her eyes as if she were thinking. If one were to see Kouta-san now, they may think her to be some sort of philosopher. Such was how calm, how transcendental she looked. By contrast, like a cat that had just been shaved, I was pacing frenetically around this room, this completely barren, this reddish-black, this crappily painted room. As if I were imprisoned by the uneasiness of possibly forgetting how to walk.

Shit. I did not think having a time limit for a problem would be this much of a pain. There were about two hours and fifteen minutes remaining. However, that leaned toward a best-case scenario, one in which we were given the most time possible.

This fourth floor of the seventh ward, after Utsurigi's corpse had already been carried off, this private room that belonged to Utsurigi Gaisuke, as if the dimension itself had been warped, only left an empty image. When I came here yesterday, when I came here this morning. In total, I had come here three times, and each time my impression of the room changed. I certainly did not like that man named Utsurigi, and I do not think I ever would have liked him,

but I feel like the time when I came into this room for the first time and argued with Utsurigi was the least objectionable. And this third time was the worst feeling.

”– have you not learnt anything?” Kouta-san opened her eyes, and her mouth, for the first time in twenty-five minutes. “The remaining time is becoming rather not consummate, dear friend.”

“I cannot see anything,” I answered, and then I opened my mouth for the first time in twenty-five minutes. “Leaving the trick aside, I cannot see anything about the plot….. I truly, literally do not understand.”

“Are you complaining?”

“I am being honest. I am concentrating this hard and thinking, and it seems something that even someone other than myself could think of. Yet nothing comes to mind. I cannot imagine at all of what the suspect thought of coming to this end.”

“Imagine what the suspect thought….. or perhaps they were not.”

”….. yes. Perhaps.”

Then it leaves me completely helpless. As a third-party and observer, even if I were to be able to track another person’s thoughts, I cannot track their ideologies. Cannot.

“Ritualistic….. or rather, it seems religious. Although I feel apologetic relating this to religions, the way Utsurigi was killed seems somewhat religious. In other words, this is less mysterious and more eerie. If it were mysterious, we must find elucidation, but if it is eerie, there is nothing that can be done. **That** was gruesome to that level.”

“Was it?” Kouta-san said in a surprised tone. “I have seen to this point much more gruesome corpses. I have also seen much more gruesome life forms. I do not wish to try to

order them, but if I were pressed, I would say the decapitated head I saw two years ago was the most extreme.”

“A hanging corpse?” I was not really getting anywhere in thought, so I joined Kouta-san’s topic. “I have seen those, too.”

“No, a **living** decapitated head. A person living with just their head.”

“That is impossible? A person would die with just their head.”

“There is no problem as long as one performs proper medical procedures. After all, the heart is but a pump. The lungs are but oxygen supply tanks. Other internal organs can be simplified as nutrition creation factories. As long as you provide the brain with blood and oxygen and nutrition, one can live with just a head. Of course, there are no internal organs nor throat, so they cannot talk, but they can still communicate.”

”..... what is the purpose of that?”

“There is no purpose. Just interest. Are you not curious, yourself? Whether a person can live with just a head. I can understand that ideology, personally. Compared to something like that–” Kouta-san glanced at the opposite wall. The remains of Utsurigi’s crucifixion remained. ”– Mr. Utsurigi Gaisuke’s means of death does not seem like an illogical ideology at all. There is just logical ideology.”

Kouta-san pushed herself lightly off the wall, and opened the door.

“Where are you going?”

“I am being kind and giving you space. Is it not easier to think when you are alone?”

“Well, true..... still, where are you going, Kouta-san?”

"Have you forgotten about my real profession?" Kouta-san grinned audaciously. "I was able to enter the impenetrable seventh ward, after all, so I shall go scavenge. Things may have already been sorted, but..... well, I'll be back soon enough."

And then Kouta-san left the room.

"Real profession..... I am but a university student, though....." I mumbled, and then I moved to where Kouta-san had previously been standing, and leaned against the wall as she did. "..... why did things turn out like this..... what do things turn out like this, always always always."

I complained to no one.

"..... I am through with this. Really. I am through with this. I really am. I really am. I have had enough."

Son of a bitch. Son of a bitch son of a bitch son of a bitch. Sons of bitches more scum than people. Want me to just die here? Want me to just mix my blood into Utsurigi's blood? Take out the knife from my left breast-pocket and stab it into my abdomen and cut vertically. And then pull out my internal organs and scatter them. And then chew on my own liver to liven things up and then stab blades into these eyes that are not being of any use to anyone. Once they reach the brain my head will hopefully finally begin functioning normally. And then cut straight down the skull just like that past the throat and slice the collarbone and sunder the ribs and then reach the aorta, and if my strength and consciousness last, to the heart. I would certainly put forth a grand display of spurting blood. The problem is whether this knife has that much durability. However, even if it did not, I would still die. And then if I were to be born again this time I would study and study and study and become a researcher. I would become a researcher and then

construct a research facility deep in the mountains but I would absolutely not break or go mad, and for the world and for people, yet not for praise, I would research day and night. For people in trouble and for people un-blessed I would use my strengths unheralded. I would not accept the cheap stereotype that *just because I am an academic I am alright being insane*, and I would feel empathy for others and would be a person who thinks of others, first.

”….. wow, no….. what am I thinking.”

To begin with, once you go into rebirth, you signal the end of humanity. I must be extremely tired. I slid down to the floor, as if rubbing my back against the wall. A tremendously heavy, falling feeling. I was imprisoned in the sense that I had completely sank down and yet was still falling. I cradled my head into my hands and sighed.

“Have I broken…..”

What passed through my mind was what Kunagisa said. That when I truly thought that I was no longer capable, then I could call Nao-san. Or perhaps the red contractor Mankind’s Strongest. In the case that I were to rely on her. I would cease having to experience such a struggle. I could borrow a phone from Neo-san….. or perhaps I could use the network to reach out which, despite the slight need for effort, should not be too difficult. The contradictory situation in that despite being able to use such a backdoor I cannot. Am I truly generous enough to approve of such a contradiction… am I truly just a person enough?

Have I not done enough?

”….. of course I have not.”

There is never a point to effort unless it is given to the end.

Not that this was something that could be called effort.

“How, ugly…..”

There is a difference between value and rarity. Having come dangerously close to blaming the world on my own powerlessness – no, having come close to revealing that I had already been blaming the world, I mumbled without hiding the hatefulness toward myself for trying to escape from something that way, and stood up.

As I thought that I had wasted time for no reason, I looked at the opposite wall.

You just watch, 『DEAD BLUE』!!

”*Shut up and watch*….. could it be that this is the one with the message?”

There remained the possibility that the suspect was providing a clue on his own accord. I ignored various theories and tried changing the order of the twenty-five letters on the wall, tried dissecting each letter and recreating letters, tried writing it over in a different language, and tried other such things, but in the end, none of them resulted in anything conclusive. I even forcibly created a language for it, but it felt like I was just trying to will something to happen. These words may have to just be taken literally.

While I did that, the time remaining ticked down to two hours.

“Really, what shall I do, Kunagisa-kun.”

As I did a long time ago, as I did before I realized that she were a girl, I called out to Kunagisa. Of course, the Kunagisa Tomo of six years no longer existed, and even the present Kunagisa Tomo existed in the basement of the fourth ward. Thus, there was obviously no answer.

But there was something else instead of an answer. Suddenly, from somewhere – the hallway – an ear-piercing

siren noise began echoing everywhere. No, this was not something as normal as a noise. This was like a shockwave. It applied air pressure sufficient to blast apart my ear drums. It was so unpleasant that if one had the talent of purity of tone they still would not be able to identify the note, and it slammed through the door.

"What! What did I do! Really!"

I shouted at the top of my lungs as I went through the door. There was no particular reason to be so loud, but the alarm had such volume that without shouting like this it would not even count as speaking to myself. When I entered the hallway the noise became even louder. I felt like my head was being hammered with cymbals.

"———-!"

I could no longer hear my own voice, even when shouting. Such a small tremor was nothing in the face of the large tidal wave of sound. There must be a speaker somewhere, I thought, as I covered both of my ears, and frantically chased the ceiling with my eyes. Unless I can find and destroy the speaker, my brain would go nuts.

However, before I could even do just that, the next moment, the noise suddenly stopped. I slowly let go of my ears. No, I reminded myself I could not let up my guard yet. There exists the term 'eye of the hurricane.' It would be a folly to think that it was over after going silent once. There could still be a second wave. No, wait, this is indoors. There should not be a hurricane. No, I am confused. I do not understand. Am I stupid?

"Are you feeling consummate?" the door to the stairs opened and Kouta-san arrived from a lower floor. "Hello, long time no see."

"No, long time no see, it has not yet been fifteen

minutes."

"Has it not? Well that is consummate."

Kouta-san beamed as she pulled the brim of her hat back down. As if she were trying to escape my gaze. Yes. Her behavior was clearly and obviously suspicious.

"Kouta-san….. what did you do?"

"I acquired such a thing," she said as she pulled an four MO discs 2) from her pocket – I think – and fanned them out. "They are not directly related to my objective, however, Utsurigi Gaisuke's research data is still quite a find."

"And you found the alarm system, too….." I could tell my speech was still a bit slurred. "I know I am not one to talk, but….. Kouta-san, do you think before you act?"

"How rude, of course I do. I am thinking even as we stand here now."

That was synonymous with not thinking.

"We are best partners….." I mumbled a joke that was not a joke. "What shall we do? That sound probably reached the Professor in the first ward. This building is very heavily secured so the sound probably did not reach him, but it must have reached him through the security system."

"It would be thankful if he thought it were just a false alarm, but life does not go as smoothly," Kouta-san seemed to say indifferently, as if it were somebody else's business, yet it was so clearly hers this time. "How bothersome."

Indeed, it is bothersome.

While I may pull Kouta-san back, it was unexpected that Kouta-san would pull me back instead. This indeed was truly and without a doubt nonsense.

"….. let us run to the rooftop. We may not be found there."

"Indeed. At the very least, it does sound better than being in the building," Kouta-san quickly answered, and then we climbed the stairs, climbed the ladder, opened the steel lid, and went out onto the rooftop. Kouta-san stretched her back once, and then walked to toward the west and crawled to the edge. I did not know what she intended, but I followed suit anyways. From the cedar trees – or was it oak? I do not really know – but in any case we could see two silhouettes walking in a jog (given the contradictory overlap of my expression you can tell how discombobulated I still am). I see, we were prone so that they could not see us even if we could see them. I had begun to think Kouta-san was trying to emulate Samuel Beckett[3)]. Not that I actually thought that.

"—….. umm," I squinted my eyes and looked at the two silhouettes. "….. Shito-kun….., ….. Misachi-san…… I think?"

"It seems so," Kouta-san remained in the crawling position as she backed up, and then once she reached a point where she would not be seen from the ground, she slapped the ground with both hands and stood up. "They received orders from the Professor to take a look… would be how it seems."

They turned the corner, and so I could no longer see the two. That corner led to the entrance of the seventh ward, to that steel door. I confirmed that, and then backed up the same way Kouta-san did. However, come to think of it, because we could no longer see them anyways, there was no purpose to this action.

"It is not consummate, but it is still slightly fortunate," Kouta-san said. "I worried about a full squad of tough guards coming in….. but two **youngsters** are no trouble at

all. It seems the Professor decided it was a false alarm."

"That would be great if true..... however, we still must not be seen."

"Then come this way," Kouta-san pulled my hand and dragged me along. I wondered where she was leading us, but it was to the shade of the water supply tank. She lead me to a small, open space that existed after stepping over several water pipes. "We will not be seen here."

"Well, perhaps we would not be seen with a simple glance..... but."

I could not call it a particularly large space. No matter how you look at it, there was only enough space for one human being. I thought it impossible that the tall Kouta-san and my not especially small adult male self could hide in that space together.

"That is not at all the case."

Kouta-san laughed mischievously – at that, I was able to imagine what was going to happen – and she pulled me to her and then shoved me in, and then, from a third-party perspective it might look like she were hugging me, or rather that was all it could look like, as she pressed herself against me while facing me, wrapped her long arms around my back, and then placed her chin over my right shoulder. Naturally, I could feel her breathing, hear her heartbeat, and feel her warmth. Of course, my breathing, my heartbeat, my warmth also could be heard and felt by her.

"Now this space is sufficient for the both of us."

"– this can end up problematic, you know." My arms were locked in place by Kouta-san and so I could not resist. No, that was not the problem. "A very big problem."

"Do you dislike problems?"

"I generally also hate solutions....."

“You’re quite naive,” Kouta-san giggled. It was a very lewd way of laughing. “By the way, if we may resume conversing, while I was looking for that MO disc I tried looking for something like a rope.”

“Was there anything?” I restrained my heartbeat as I asked. Although, hearts are automatic muscles, so they are not something that can be suppressed. “Rope.....”

“There was not. There were threads, like computer cables, but even if we were to tie them together it would be impossible to reach the sixth ward..... and of course if even cables were gone things would be obvious.”

“Is that so.....”

To begin with, it may have been stranger to hope that a research facility like this would keep rope strong enough to hold the weight of a person around. If there is no rope, then something like a rope..... or so I tried to think, but the scent of Kouta-san’s long hair kept obstructing my train of thought. Or perhaps my thoughts were the ones derailing my thinking. Calm down. Calm down. Think of something else.

”..... hair..... Kouta-san, how about hair?”

“Yes? What about hair?” Kouta-san asked as she hugged me even tighter. Because she was taller than me, being like this made me feel like I was being treated like a child. Suzunashi-san treats me like a child too but, how should I put it, Kouta-san seemed to be taking the exact opposite approach for treating me like a child. “Do you mean my hair?”

“No, I am not..... but would hair be a substitute for rope?”

I had heard that hair is rather firm. Of course, each strand is a mere thread, but some thousand, some tens of

thousand strands would turn them into a strong rope. There are cases in history of people having been strangled by hair, so if you were to ask whether it were possible or impossible–

"Ahh, you mean Koutari-san, dear friend," Kouta-san spoke as if she were whispering into my ear. It gave me goosebumps. "Indeed, for him to have become bald just from a sentence from you is unnatural–"

Exactly. No matter what you may think, my words are not that enticing. Then in that case, there must have been a different reason to cut that long hair – to shave that long hair. I thought a little about that expressionless, apathetic researcher.

"For example – if Koutari-san were to infiltrate the seventh ward using the route we just took. And then he murdered Utsurigi. He crucified Utsurigi to the wall, and then when he was leaving, realized it would be impossible to jump down. Plus, it was raining, so it was even more impossible. However, he must not remain here. Then he would need something like a rope–"

"And so he used his own hair?" Kouta-san asked. "Somewhat consummate, but there is a problem."

"What do you mean by a problem?" Would that be a bigger problem than your right hand that is rubbing my thighs? "What do you mean, Kouta-san?"

"First, every single one of the rooftops in this facility lacks a fence or railing. In other words, even if you were to throw a rope, there would be nothing to tie it to. You would need some sort of hook to latch onto the edges. Second, there is still too much distance."

"Distance – do you mean about five meters? Since we are using rope, you would not have to worry about angle."

"Even if Koutari-san's hair were a meter long, you know. While I would agree having seen him from a distance that he had a good amount of hair, even if you were to use it all, if you were to even fold it five times over, you would still not create rope strong enough to hold a person. Even if you were to weave the most efficient of rope, four meters would be the best you could do."

Five times over – four meters. Right, in order to use the hair you would need to twist it to strengthen it, and you would need to deal with knotting it, too. Indeed, in that case it would hardly reach five meters. As Kouta-san said, four meters would be the upper limit. But that would not be enough, and even if you were to make one or two ridiculous assumptions – like if his hair were to suddenly grow – and the hair were able to reach across the chasm, the first problem still existed, in that there were no hook, and that he would not be able to latch the hair onto the sixth ward. I felt like I had finally come to a psychological solution – and while having my chastity threatened like this, too! – but it seemed Koutari-san had indeed simply cut his hair. What a misleading thing to do! If this were a mystery novel, I would say it were being unfair.

"Is it really not possible to jump that..... sort of distance."

"It would be possible for someone world class. However it is unthinkable for an ordinary human being."

"Human being," I latched onto that phrase. "..... then, would it be possible for something not human?"

"Huh?" Kouta-san answered with an astonished tone. "What do you mean? Are you trying to say that the suspect is a monster or something? Huh..... I don't care, but you know, I wonder what the others would think? You might want to care for who you try to persuade with that."

"There is no need to jump to monsters. This world is not comprised only of human beings and monsters. There are animals….. like dogs," I continued without stopping my line of thought. Otherwise I was only going to lose more concentration. "Would you say it is possible for a large dog to jump seven meters?"

"Are you referring to the three dogs that Kasugai-san kee… no, owns?"

"Well, yes. An animal murder theory," I nodded. By nodding, my jaw dug itself deeper into Kouta-san's body. Augh. "….. even otherwise, someone mentioned that there are boars in this mountain….. and while it may be impossible for boars to make the jump, then perhaps a bird….."

"Are you serious? I admire your capability of saying one silly theory after another," Kouta-san did not sound as if she were admiring at all. "So, how does a dog kill Utsurigi-san? Are you saying the dog used a knife to slice Utsurigi-san up? It is a bizarre and incredulous theory, and you do not feel it any odd?"

"Depending on training….. no, it is impossible," it did not seem an argument I could win either way, so I decided to retreat. "….. shit. So the suspect remains undecided….."

"Undecided? Don't you mean uncertain?"

"We shall have to call someone the suspect in the end anyways, so undecided is fine….. anyways, is it alright now? Shito-kun and Misachi-san probably went back already."

I squirmed and tried to escape from Kouta-san, but Kouta-san would not let me go, replying, "It is too early to feel safe." She says it is too early, but it has already been ten, fifteen minutes since Shito-kun came into the seventh

ward – which also meant that I was being embraced by Kouta-san for ten, fifteen minutes – so I felt that enough time had passed for them to consider this a false alarm.

"Kouta-sa–" "Shh."

My complaint was forcibly suppressed by Kouta-san. Or more specifically, the back of my head was grabbed and my face was pushed into Kouta-san's shoulder, and so I was forced into silence. I wondered what was going on and turned my head, and noticed that the lid to the rooftop on the other side of the water tanks was slowly turning. Of course, that inorganic steel lid with no machinations would never begin moving on its own–

"Shit! What is this lid! It's fucking heavy! Damnit! What am I, a dumbell-lifting Olympian?"

Shito-kun's voice. Shito-kun's voice could be heard from the other side of the entrance. It seemed he was having trouble pushing up the lid.

"– I am surprised that they would even check the rooftop," I sighed with despair. "Wary, I suppose I should say….. well I guess it cannot be helped given the circumstances….."

"Or rather, a huge clump of MO discs are missing, so this was expected."

Said the thief. That is right. The alarm began sounding because Kouta-san had taken the MO discs in the first place. Then Shito-kun and Misachi-san would start by looking in that room. And once they notice the discs were missing, then they would never think this a false alarm. They would obviously investigate every nook and cranny.

"You should have just put them back….."

"You cannot call yourself a first-class thief if you return what you have once stolen. Come, get a little closer. We'll

be found."

She tightened her hold on me and pushed me deeper. Of course, there was nothing *deeper* for me to be pushed into, so the result was simply that she pressed herself even closer against me. If we were to be found like this, I would not really have an excuse to say. As a result, I wrapped my arms around her. If I may be found while eating the poison, I might as well eat the whole dish. I shall even eat the table and the chair while I am at it.

"My, my. How lewd of you, dear friend," Kouta-san smiled happily. "I, do not, dislike this."

"I hate it..... now please, be quiet....."

Shito-kun had finally figured it out, as he successfully lifted the lid. And then he slowly pulled his small form onto the rooftop.

"Ahh, shit, what a pain..... why am I stuck doing this crap, when we're so stupid busy..... it's absurd...... there's no way there's an intruder..... I mean, how do you get in here anyways..... there's a limit to how paranoid you can be, Misachi-san....."

Shito-kun whispered to himself. It seemed he was the type that talked to himself a lot. I felt a strange sense of intimacy with him. Including the part that most of what he said were complaints.

Shito-kun shut the lid, and then glanced around.

"There's no one....." he whispered. "Right, check. Left, check..... god, so stupid....."

It seemed he had no intention of checking carefully. Indeed in that sense, this position may have been the best of hiding places. The problem just lay with the way we were hiding. Oh no. I felt like I was the one reaching my limit. Ahh. I feel hot.

"The Kunagisa Syndicate isn't picking up any calls either….. really….." his mumbling continued, and he placed a hand back on the lid. "What's gonna happen….. I mean, that's pretty messed up of the Professor to want to turn that cute-ish girl into a specimen….. what's he trying to do, **make another one like me**? – I mean, even placing a hand on someone from the Kunagisa Syndicate."

Kunagisa Syndicate….. the reason that I was slowly losing immediately recovered upon hearing that. It seemed Professor Kyouichirou was gradually….. well, not really, but it seemed he was progressing things, as Suzunashi-san and Neo-san, and Miyoshi-sensei predicted. However, what caught my attention was not that fact, but rather the speech mannerism of Shito-kun, who did not seem to agree with the methods. Shito-kun was supposed to be an absolute backer of Professor Kyouichirou, so what was going on here?

And then I remembered Neo-san's words. *Oogaki-kun and Uze-san have a reason for their adulation of the Professor. Respect toward the Professor, repaying of favors from the Professor, and so on. However, that's why all you have to do is provide them with more.* That was probably, in other words, a simple matter of arithmetic. Add, subtract, multiply, and divide. Shito-kun may currently be wavering. If that were the case. If that were the case–

Then, Shito-kun paused as he was about to open the lid. He did not just pause, he was staring in our direction. With displeasure, as if he were suspecting something, he stared the water tank, behind which Kouta-san and I hid. Did he notice? No, there was no way he could notice. After all, Shito-kun tried returning once. There was no way he could see. There was no way he could see, but–

“Hey. Someone there?” finally, Shito-kun spoke. “Someone there behind that tank?”

I almost blurted something out, but that was muffled by Kouta-san.

“If someone’s there, come out,” Shito-kun withdrew his hand from the lid and stood up. “It’s obvious, you know, that someone’s there. Huh? If you’re not gonna come to me, I’m gonna come to you.”

”– there is no helping it, then,” Kouta-san said, and let go of me with a disappointed expression. “Stay here.”

“What? But, Kou-”

“I’m coming now!”

Kouta-san shouted loudly toward Shito-kun. And then she whispered to me.

“Until everything is over, absolutely do not come out,” she said, and then she pushed me down again, walked around the tank, and showed herself to Shito-kun.

There was no time for me to stop her.

And in any case, I could not think of a reason to stop her. There were no words that could be said to stop her anyways, because despite having fallen into such a troublesome situation, despite having fallen into this, she showed a *this is absolutely nothing* expression.

”– huh? What?” Shito-kun had an annoyed voice. “Ahh, ahh? …… what? You. I don’t know you.”

“Shall I introduce myself?” Kouta-san smiled to Shito-kun. “The name is Ishimaru Kouta. Of course, you all may recognize me better as one Zerozaki Itoshiki.”

”….. the intruder from three days ago,” Shito-kun answered. ”….. what. You, that voice, a girl? You’re huge….. not as big as that big sis though.”

“Are you interested in girls, **young sir**?” Kouta-san

stepped toward Shito-kun without a care. “That is quite and rather consummate.”

“Don’t move! You won’t get away with this!”

“With what?” Kouta-san said, feigning ignorance. “We cannot converse without getting closer, can we not? You called out for me because you wanted to talk, did you not?”

“Shit, I said don’t move!”

Shito-kun backed up as he shouted. There was no reason for him to back up, but he was probably feeling cowed. I remembered my meeting with her for the first time last night, how she had an eerie, mysterious quality to her. It was overwhelming, terribly overwhelming. You would obviously feel cowed by trying to take on such a person straight-up. As such, Shito-kun was currently trying to escape from Kouta-san somehow. It was probably not so much subconscious so much as primal instinct.

“Fufu–,” Kouta-san stopped moving. At the entrance to the ward. “If you do not have anything to talk about, then I shall take my leave–”

”! No you won’t!”

Shito-kun pounced at Kouta-san. Obligation won out over fear. However, while that may have been the right thing to do, I could not call it the wise thing to do. Because it was obvious that the *intruder* Ishimaru Kouta that showed herself to him had no intention of escaping. It was obvious that Kouta-san’s words and actions were all just a means of inviting him to combat.

It was obvious that Shito-kun stood no chance of accepting that fight.

Kouta-san turned backwards to evade Shito-kun’s fist. And then she continued turning, sinking her long leg into Shito-kun’s abdomen. That spin move was closer to Tae

Kwon Do than Karate. Among numerous martial arts styles, only Tae Kwan Do accepted turning your entire back to the opponent at any time.

Shito-kun bend over, but Kouta-san did not let up. With her other leg – it was another Tae Kwan Do move – this time she stomped her heel into Shito-kun's heart. This forced his body to stand back up, and then he bent over backwards. And then Kouta-san spun once more, and using that torque, struck a palm into the right lung – this was a Judo move.

"Gua… gah!"

Shito-kun was not even able to scream, as he emitted just some grunts. By the point you could hear those grunts, you could tell who had won the fight. However, even so. Even so, Kouta-san did not let up. She elbowed his abdomen, back-handed his heart, kneed his kidney, and finally did a roundhouse kick to slam him to the ground.

It took an instant – no, it was even faster than that, given that Shito-kun was only able to utter that much. It seemed he had been knocked unconscious. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Kouta-san pummeled Shito-kun until he lost consciousness. I could not think of another reason for such precise blows to internal organs. Of course, that was all done to escape from here, but I still could not shake away the feeling that she had gone too far.

"Kouta-san–"

I was about to step out from behind the water tank, but,

"FREEEEEEEEEeeeeeeeeeeeZE!"

That violent, explosion of noise nailed me back in place. I looked and saw Uze Misachi-san pointing a handgun at Kouta-san. Kouta-san was crouched down next to the felled Shito-kun, and when Misachi-san suddenly appeared, she

looked mildly surprised and said, “My.”

“There was another of you – I had completely forgotten.”

”– please do not move – I will shoot.”

The handgun Misachi-san held in both hands, ….. I think it was a Jericho 941. An Israeli clone of the CZ-75. An handgun that could switch between 9mm Luger and 41AE bullets. Also, I think the company used the same design for the more famous Desert Eagle. My memory may not be correct, so I could not say for certain, but in any case, the problem here was not the type of handgun.

Considering the importance of the secrets here, it is not strange for handguns to be equipped as a security measure – however, this was still out of the ordinary. It was too much. For Kouta-san, even though she took out Shito-kun in a flash–

”– hahah. Ahahahahahah!”

However. Kouta-san simply burst out laughing at that Misachi-san. And then she seemed not to mind the handgun at all, and simply stood up. As if she were making a mockery of it.

“Ahahah– hahahahahah.”

“What is it!? Why’re you laughing! I said don’t move!”

“I’m laughing because you said not to move, young lady,” Kouta-san raised her chin, looking down at Misachi-san, who stood three-quarters her height. “In this situation. In this situation, with your friend pummeled into the ground, to say that you won’t shoot if they don’t move. And then to not shoot even when they move. How lukewarm. It’s one thing to be cold, and it’s another thing to be hot, but you all are truly lukewarm. Even if you are mere side-characters who only appear to lose, if this is all you have to try to overrun me, then it’s indeed quite a good joke–”

"Quiet! Shut up!"

Misachi-san raised her gun to the air, and fired a bullet. A threat, and proof that there were real bullets inside. And by that harsh sound I could tell there were not the 9mm Lugers but rather the 41AEs. In other words, at most there were ten shots left in the magazine. There were five less shots than if it were using 9mm Lugers, but that is still simply a comparison, as nine shots are still plenty to kill a person – or even two people.

"If you take me lightly again, I'll really shoot! Intruder! Get away from Shito-kun!"

"You say to not move, and then before the inside of your mouth dries, you say to move away from your friend. What do you really want me to, young lady," Kouta-san smirked – and she continued mocking her opponent. "It is not consummate in the least. A young lady like you working as a secretary, and this simplistic fool of a boy working as an assistant, so this must mean Professor Shadou Kyouichirou is not nearly as the rumors say. If this is all, then I might as well have just gone in from the front instead of **taking such a roundabout path**."

"Young lady? Don't you get the situation you're in!? Do you think I won't shoot–"

"You think that everyone will oblige you just by holding a handgun. You think that everyone will submit just by showing power. That is why you're a young lady," Kouta-san said as she kept close distance with Misachi-san – or rather, as she kept close distance with the handgun. "If you think you can kill a person with that toy, you are greatly mistaken. Are you one of those that believe that you can beat a battleship with a single spear?"

"Shut up – do you think I'd miss at this distance?"

Misachi-san tightened her stance with the handgun. “If you remain quiet, we won’t deal badly with you–”

“And be used in one of the Professor’s **human experiments**? – like this simplistic fool lying down over here.”

“Shut up!” Misachi-san exploded at those words. ”– what’s your goal? Why’d you come in here? What lab sent you here!”

”– let us suppose,” Kouta-san lowered the tone of her voice a bit. “That the speed of the first bullet fired is roughly seven-hundred kilometers per hour. In that case, how much time does it take to travel the distance between you and I, roughly two meters?”

”.....? What’re you talking about?”

“A supposition. The answer, young lady?”

”..... 0.08 seconds,” Misachi-san answered suspiciously. ”..... so what? That just means that a human being can’t dodge a bullet.”

“It is difficult, if you just hear that number. However–” Kouta-san pointed at Misachi-san. No, she pointed to Misachi-san’s handgun. ”– Jericho 941. The trigger is 7.7 centimeters, so it’s a double-action barrel. Am I right?”

”.....? .....? So! What’s the point?”

“That you immediately throw a tantrum is why you’re a young lady. There’re no differences between you and the child monkeys you can find in the red-light districts. A double-action barrel means that you require 5 kilograms of force for the trigger. A single-action would require half that, of course. It would take at least 0.5 seconds for a lady like you to pull that trigger. And that’s on the shorter end.”

”—-? .....!”

“That is not all. Furthermore, it requires 0.02 seconds for

the hammer to fall. By this point it will have taken 0.6 seconds. Now, this is a simple calculation of how long it takes for the bullet to reach me from where it's fired, but we must add the time taken to make sure the bullet hits. In other words, the time it takes for you to line up the shot. My brain, my heart, well really it doesn't matter, but the time taken to make sure that 41 Action Express lands would be 0.1 seconds for a professional, so for a beginner like you it might be at least 0.4 seconds? In total, it would take a second. A full second. This is like eternity. At the very least, it is more than enough time to traverse a mere two meters."

"Shut up! Even if I miss once, I still have a second and third–"

"There is no point to an attack that takes a full second in between, young lady. It would be much faster to just hit me with your hands. Since we are given such a golden opportunity for learning, I shall remind you of one more thing, young lady. Handguns are a weapon to be used at range. At the very worse you want five meters, preferably at least ten meters between you and your target. That would mean no matter how fast I move, all you need to do is line up the shot, so even if you fire five times at least one of them should hit. It would be consummate to say that unless you are catching them unaware, a handgun is a weapon that can only be used at range. Newbies are deceived by its looks. Even if the weapon allows for one-shot victories, unless that one shot lands, there is no meaning nor value–"

"Sh- shut up!"

Misachi-san pulled the trigger. This time, for sure, toward Kouta-san.

An explosion sounded – and that was all. Just like she had done toward Shito-kun, Kouta-san twisted herself to avoid the path of the bullet, and in the same motion closed on Misachi-san, and slammed a palm up into her jaw. Misachi-san's body was lifted into the air. And then Kouta-san slammed an elbow with her entire body's force into Misachi-san's body, which had temporarily been freed from gravity.

I do not know how to express that single motion. It was completely different from how she fought against Shito-kun. Indeed, it was like a terribly efficient and beautiful wave.

Misachi-san's body tumbled along the rooftop, as if sliding – it reminded me of a curling stone – and stopped right at the edge. She did not get up nor even utter a sound. Kouta-san walked next to Misachi-san, confirmed that she had lost consciousness, and then plucked the gun out of her hand.

"– you can come out now, dear friend."

"………." I revealed myself from behind the water tank. "………. thank you."

"Hmmhmm," Kouta-san playfully pointed the barrel of the Jericho toward me. "Bang! Ahahah!"

"………."

"My. You seem unhappy."

"Well, no….. I just thought, maybe you went too far….." I looked at the crumpled two. "And I think you put yourself in too much danger. To taunt someone with a handgun….."

"If I didn't taunt her, I would have been shot."

"Perhaps. ….. then does that mean what you said was a lie?"

"I would prefer if you called it a means."

Kouta-san smiled and laughed, and then threw the Jericho to me. I caught it while thinking she was being quite careless without even setting the safety. It was heavy. Well of course. A Jericho weighs over a kilogram. Even a male like myself would struggle to hold this gun out straight. And – and, of course, Misachi-san.

In other words, that was all. What Kouta-san kept spouting was just a way to buy time. In truth, Misachi-san's arms had just been worn out. To the point where she could no longer aim properly. To the point where it would even slow her muscles' ability to react to the order to fire.

"Newbies are more likely to being duped by specific numbers and logic – I suppose."

You'll get burned if you get tricked by numbers for anything – I think Kunagisa said that.

"That is all. I do not know the bullet velocity of a Jericho," Kouta-san nodded. "I leave that in your hands. You know how to use it, do you not? I can use it too, but I am not fond of them. Because I feel that is makes things unfair."

"Huh….. unfair….." I turned on the safety mechanism and slid the Jericho into the belt of my trousers. It made me feel off-kilter, but there was no real other way to carry this. "However, what shall we do next? Now they know you are intruding."

"That is on its own consummate. Now….. because *there was an intruder after all,* the level of suspicion toward Kunagisa-san is alleviated, is it not?"

"Well, that is good for us, but for Kouta-san….."

"This is not enough to trouble me. There is not one reason for me to be troubled. And….." Kouta-san moved to where Shito-kun lay. "Now we have a means of escaping,

too.”

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1) insane logic
2) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magneto-optical_drive
3) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Beckett

二日目（5）――首輪物語

Day 2 (5)
Collar Tale

0

It is easy to trick a genius.
It is difficult to trick an idiot.
It is impossible to trick a pig.

1

When there was less than an hour left, I returned once more to Neo-san's private room. Neo-san and Kouta-san went to a separate room to discuss what they were going to do next – that next presumably being something an *afterwards* completely unrelated to Kunagisa and I – and so I was left alone in this room. I simply sat in a sofa surrounded by various paintings, mumbling alone to myself.

The sound of the clock ticking away the seconds was loud. I felt like I should have prepared for this and brought a digital watch. But Kunagisa had customized that so much that it had become a completely messed-up clock, and this analog watch was a gift from Hime-chan, so wearing it felt like an obligation, so I did not have a choice after all.

"A choice – but it may be a relative blessing to even have one choice."

Choose.

The action of choosing.

I pulled out Misachi-san's Jericho from my belt and stared at it. It had a very boorish form. However, handling it – as long as I did not let myself lose my calm as Misachi-san had done earlier – was not too difficult. Practicing even without reaching the levels of being called training would be enough to give me good aim.

"This country is really peaceful….."

The *means of escaping* that Kouta-mentioned was quite simple. First, she pulled the unconscious Misachi-san and Shito-kun inside the ward, and tied up Misachi-san with a PC cable. She said Misachi-san probably would not awaken for half a day anyways, but it was just for insurance. As for Shito-kun, Kouta-san tossed him to me (literally, tossed him), and made me carry him on my back.

"I support the feminist movement. That men and women should be equal."

"Then it is right for you to carry him, dear friend," Kouta-san smiled. "As men and women are equal, it is clear who between you and I has authority."

Indeed.

It was, of course, not like Kouta-san had handed Shito-kun to me out of kindness. In short, Oogaki Shito-kun's role was to be a *key*. His unconscious eye was for the retina scanner. We then used the card he carried around, and I had heard the ID number enough times to have remembered it. I was a bit unsure of whether it was ikwe9f2ma444 or ikwe9mada423 but Kouta-san hurried me and I was able to remember. It was the same for the memorized number. I was a lot more worried about this one (I felt like it would be really handy to have Kunagisa in

these cases) but it seemed I was correct. However, both the number and the ID were just bonuses for the security system. The important things were the card, the retina check – and the voice. In other words, the real proofs of identity. Of these, we were able to clear the card and the retina check, but there was no chance of forcing the unconscious Shito-kun to speak–

"Oogaki Shito. My ID is ikwe9f2ma444."

Kouta-san said, **changing her voice**.

"Voice and retina confirmed. Please wait."

The synthetic voice responded, and the door opened.

"Why are you surprised? Aikawa Jun does not need to have monopoly over vocal mimicry, does she?" Kouta-san stated. "Even I can trick a machine. **These** are consummately simple constructs."

"You know Aikawa-san?"

Kouta-san made a slightly displeased expression at my question, but she quickly recovered, and said, "I have heard about her through the grapevine."

"I had a feeling you meant that notorious Aikawa Jun when you mentioned a contractor – of course, if it were her, she would deceive not just machines but even God. Well, we must hurry along or the door will shut. Ahh, leave Shito-kun there, will you? We've tied up his hands and his feet, so he can do nothing."

In other words, this time it was Shito-kun and Misachi-san who were captured. While we would be found out eventually, it was best delayed as much as possible. Even if the Professor would eventually realize the two were missing and act, we would still be given a bit of reprieve until the time limit. Well, perhaps that is too much to hope for, but in any case, that was how Kouta-san and I

succeeded in escaping the seventh ward.

".........."

– so now, a question.

Ishimaru Kouta, who meticulously infiltrated this facility, and even succeeded in remaining inside by feigning that she had already gone *outside*. The Machiavellist, the schemer, the sly, the resourceful, the veteran Ishimaru Kouta. Do you really think that Ishimaru Kouta would be distracted by an MO disc (regardless of how important the data on it might have been) and accidentally set off the alarm? If I were to go further, Misachi-san aside, what if she (bearing in mind how easily she defeated) bothered engaging in a long conversation with the untrained Shito-kun simply to learn his voice–

How terrifying. What was more terrifying than anything else was not her action (– after all, Aikawa-san would do something like that too, and even Kunagisa would have been able to calculate that much of an escape route–) but rather her audacity to do all of that with such nonchalance. It would be neither praise nor critique to say that her plan had not at all a high probability of success. If Misachi-san had opted for escape, then that would have been the end of it, and there was no guarantee that only a small number of people would come. There were plenty of other issues hidden away. Of course, most importantly, that she was relying on my (my!) memory was the biggest problem of all. If I were to have come up with this plan myself it would have been without a doubt foolishness. This sort of heroic absurdity is in most cases *in retrospect the smartest way of accomplishing something through the only method possible*, but I still would not think that to be the case. I risked my life – no, I **abandoned** my life to jump from the sixth ward to the

seventh ward, but I would not be surprised if someone were to ask if this was not on par with that decision.

”.........”

However, Kouta-san’s scheme succeeded beautifully, and so here we are.

After our escape, Kouta-san contacted Neo-san with her wireless, and Neo-san stepped outside as if to see off the visiting (or more accurately, he had called for her) Kasugai-san, and let us in on the way back in.

In the end, Kouta-san was certain we would succeed, and I was not. Even before determining whether that risk was worth taking or not, I was unable to come up with such an audacious idea.

”– I suppose that is the difference between a completed work and a perfect work.....”

And the difference in those who can see things and those who cannot. Perhaps that was all that was behind this Utsurigi Gaisuke crucifixion incident. That the suspect was seeing something that an ordinary person like myself could not, and that the dismembering of the corpse and the destruction of the corpse, and the taking of the arms, and the elegant blood message, all of it all, may have been for some purpose.

”..... one hour twenty-five minutes remaining.....”

Or if I were to say *Dead Blue*-style, one hour twenty-four minutes forty-six point seventy-seven seconds. However, after thinking for two-and-a-half hours and not coming up with any leads, was it realistic to hope for something to come up in the last hour and a half? Thinking negatively was not going to progress matters any, either, but I could not help my mind tumbling in that direction.

“Shiogi-chan – if you were in my position, even in this

worst of positions in the worst of situations, would you be able to come up with the most effective clever scheme that could exist?"

Well, of course you would.

However, it is impossible for me.

It seems I am incapable of becoming a strategist even remotely the class of Shiogi-chan.

For example, how about if I were to force something together. Let me think hard enough that I would be able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with even Professor Kyouichirou. Yes, for example – right now, Ishimaru Kouta-san, who is helping me out with my thinking. What would happen if we were to **suppose her as the suspect**?

One cannot say it impossible. After all, Professor Kyouichirou does not know of her existence, and within this facility the only one who knows about her is the corrupt Neo-san (although currently Shito-kun and Misachi-san would also be in the know). And unlike the researchers, Kouta-san was not restricted to any research ward. As a result, there are less obstacles for her being suspected than any other suspect. And that thinking speed, that wisdom, and that decision-making that she had just shown me, would make murdering Utsurigi and coming up with such an unsolvable crime a piece of cake–

"..... such hideous nonsense."

I forced shut the forced theory. There was only so far I could handle the lack of logic. I did not intend to respect Professor Kyouichirou any, but the Professor's forced theory about Kunagisa Tomo being the suspect was much more believable. Truly, this world had no lack of mysterious respect.

"In that case, Neo-san would, under the same reason.....

well, there is one more bizarre theory.....”

That would simply be the possibility that **I myself** am the suspect. Would it not be a rather tasteful twist if I, a mere accomplice to Kunagisa Tomo’s visit, were the suspect behind the killing of Utsurigi Gaisuke? Of course, that would simply be tasteful, and meaningless. I know that I am not the suspect, and while I harbored hostility toward Utsurigi, I did not harbor any intent to murder.

However.

In this case, **whether an action took place** did not matter. All that mattered was that **it was acceptable**. As long as some level of logic could be followed–

“I am thinking such foolish things.”

I mumbled, and then I found a phone in the room. I own a cell phone, but I had left it in the wooden apartment I called my home. Because, leaving the satellite cell phone that Kunagisa used (which Professor Kyouichirou confiscated) aside, there was no way I could get signal here so deep in the mountains. However, phone companies are bound by law, such that no matter where you are in Japan (including a lonely island in the middle of the ocean or in an unexplored region of a mountain range) if there is a request, they are obligated to connect the phone line. As a result, even this Shadow Kyouichirou Research Facility was connected to the outside via a network, and that was why Neo-san’s private room had a phone.

And then it hit me. Usually, phone lines in these sorts of facilities are designed not to have access to outside networks, but this facility was designed to house a ridiculously small number of employees. In other words, that phone probably did connect outside. By the time I had finished my thought, I had already moved to the phone,

and picked up the receiver.

As for the number I immediately tried to call, my fingers stopped midway, and I hung up the phone. Come to think of it, it was not reasonable to hope for a proper conversation with that person. That person does not speak when they do not want to speak, and that person does not speak even when they want to speak, and yet while that would be acceptable if they were listening to what I was saying, that person does not listen to any orders from anyone other than their master, and that person does not even pay attention to their master's orders. However, after thinking about it some more, there was no point in assuming that the phone would even be picked up by that person in the first place. Worst case, it might even be that crazy fortune-teller. What would that clairvoyant say about my current situation? I feel like my blood boiled just by imagining what she might say.

"Yet, Miiko-san is out….. and she does not carry a cell phone."

And Miiko-san has instincts as sharp as Onimarukunitsuna [1], so there was nothing to say that she would not sense Suzunashi-san having been locked up in a cage. Considering the immediate-action personality of Miiko-san, I could not imagine that leading to anything good. After pondering, I ended up deciding to dial Hime-chan's cell phone.

"Hello hello?" answered a somewhat nervous-sounding Hime-chan, before the phone rang even a second time. "Who is this?"

"A man who seeks world domination."

"Ahh, Master. Hullo good day," Hime-chan sounded relieved. "I was surprised by the unknown number, Master.

What's up? Weren't you supposed to be in the middle of a trip to Nagoya Prefecture?"

"Yes. Pretty much," I answered, and tilted my head to the side at her calling Nagoya a prefecture. Pretty sure she is wrong. But for some reason that sounded familiar. "Right now, well, ….. I am calling from where we are staying."

"Mhm. Guess that's why it's unknown. Ahh, you know, perfect time. Hime-chan forgot to tell Master something."

"What?"

"Souvenir. Can you bring back five bars of uirō2)?"

"Oh? Did Hime-chan like sweet things?" I asked while I tried to remember if uirō were sweet. Ahh, right. This is the Aichi Prefecture. Nagoya is just a city here. It is not Nagoya Prefecture, after all. "….. by uirō do you mean that soft thing that looks like yōkan3)? Do you like that stuff, Hime-chan?"

"Nope, Hime-chan's friend does. Do you remember? I introduced you. Usagi-chan or something. Hime-chan forgot that when Hime-chan mentioned Matser was headed to Nagoya Prefecture she started going on about uirō. Hime-chan doesn't need them, but five bars for my friend. Colorful ones, if you can. Master's sucked away plenty of money from Hime-chan, so you've got enough, right?"

"I would rather you not make me sound like a villain….. yes, you are right, if I can return safely, I will buy you five hundred bars."

"No way. I'm not Dazai4)'s *imogayu*5)."

imogayu was Akutagawa.

I corrected her, like a Master.

"Was that so. But Master, whatcha mean by that? *If I can return safely*. You make it sound like you might not."

"Who knows. They say there're green mountains

wherever you are in the world, so it's no surprise that you can die anywhere, too." Indeed, no surprise. Especially when it comes to someone like me. "But if I am not to return, you can do whatever you want with the stuff in my room."

"Really?" Hime-chan sounded excited. "Then I can take the weird T-shirts and weird jeans and weird jackets and weird socks?"

"Avoid calling other peoples' stuff weird....." and what did she want to do with socks anyways? "Yes. In exchange, Hime-chan will also have to take care of paying off the apartment and throwing away the trash and that sort of stuff."

"Ehhh," Hime-chan suddenly sounded displeased. How mercenary. "But you know, Master, you sound serious. Are you in a bind? Were you in a building when a terrorist started attacking or did a plane come crashing or did a submarine come hurtling in?"

"No, nothing like that, this time..... but something similar."

Mmhmm, Hime-chan did not sound appeased.

"Master's pretty smart but kiiiiinda stupid," Hime-chan said, not sounding anything like her age. "Hime-chan's an idiot but not stupid. So Hime-chan knows Master's fretting right now."

"Uh huh. Well that is nice. Does that mean you can help?"

"Of course not. I have class soon."

What a pure-hearted reason.

"Ah, I see..... Hime-chan is at school," I said as I checked the wristwatch Hime-chan had given me. "You should not be bringing cell phones to school."

“Yeah yeah. I get it, Master,” and then I heard a chime from far off overlapping with Hime-chan’s voice. “Oops, well, the chime rang, so Hime-chan’s gotta go now, Master.”

“Yes, farewell.”

Keeping with the politeness of being the caller, I placed the receiver back down. And then I felt like some weight had been lifted off my shoulders and sagged a bit. I sighed deeply enough that it felt like I was blowing out all the air in my lungs, and then I returned to the sofa.

That was fine.

That should be fine.

As someone who had never truly trusted the individual known as myself, I truthfully had nothing like confidence. It was not that there was any falsehood behind the words I had said to Kouta-san some hours ago, but my life is a history of failure, and mixed with regret and repentance. That was why. That was why in the event of failure, or perhaps in the event of guilt, when I repent, there should not be anything for me to have left undone.

I had finished wrapping up loose ends.

Now I just need to do what I want.

”….. maybe it would be good to go back to the cage once and talk to Kunagisa…..”

If one were to talk about a remote-control type person, Kunagisa Tomo would fall right in that category. Cooped up in her mansion, unable to even descend stairs by herself. Yet that very Kunagisa Tomo also attained and controlled worldly information and scientific knowledge (even if she were not to the level of Chii-kun). If I were to **input** the data I had gathered in the past two and a half hours, maybe she could come up with some sort of answer.

That said, going back to the fourth ward after Kasugai-san has returned would be quite risky. I do not think Kasugai-san would use the stairs, so it should be somewhat alright, but I could not help but err on the side of caution given that it would be an irreversible risk.

“No point in fretting over it, though.....”

Hime-chan is in class, anyways, I mumbled to myself. Someone hearing that would not know what I mean at all, and then I tried to leave the room. I thought about discussing it with Kouta-san. However, before I could even reach for the doorknob, the door opened toward the other side. Huh. Was this door automatic? I had unfortunately never encountered one before, but they do say the world has automatic doors that do not open sideways – no, I do not recall this door being of such make. That would mean that someone was trying to enter the room from the hallway. And as expected, Kouta-san looked at me with wide eyes.

”– my. What is it, dear friend? Why’re you standing there?”

“No, I was just thinking of returning to the cages once..... I wanted to ask for Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san’s opinions. However, that is a dangerously dangerous act, so I was wondering what to do.”

“No, I do not think that a bad idea at all,” Kouta-san said. “And, that works out quite well.”

“Quite well? Speaking of which, did you finish speaking to Neo-san?”

“I wouldn’t call it finish so much as stopped,” Kouta-san answered vaguely. “Took a small break. A visitor arrived in the middle. There was a call from Koutari-san to Neo-san just now, that Koutari-san was going to be coming here for

some purpose. But it's not like I can let Koutari-san see me. And so it seems they're going to use this room, so I've been told to take you out."

"Uh huh."

….. Koutari-san.

My mind recalled that desperately (I do not know of anything more desperate than that) weaved-together theory about Koutari Hinayoshi being the suspect. Kouta-san had instantly kicked away the idea of using his hair as a rope, but that did not mean all suspicion could be lifted. There was still the possibility that Koutari-san had used a different method to kill Utsurigi. At the very least, it seemed like Koutari-san and Utsurigi were not on friendly terms – although I do not think any human being was on friendly terms with Utsurigi.

"Not one–, ….. but you know," a question crept up my mind. "It feels like he would get along just fine with Kokoromi-sensei….."

"Utsurigi-san may have deliberately distanced himself from others," Kouta-san said. "Would it not be best to just ask Kunagisa-san about that? Of course, Kunagisa-san does not seem too keen on speaking much about Utsurigi-san."

"It cannot be helped. She is pretty clumsy. She has loose lips, but she can either say everything, or say nothing, and only one or the other. Fuzzy things like *I can say this much* are incomprehensible to her."

"Like bool. Or perhaps I should say like blue?"

"Both, of course."

I left the room and moved to the side of the hallway near Kouta-san. And then I came up with one not-that-bad idea. Of course, I could not run into Koutari-san here, but at the same time that meant that was the only thing that I could

not do. I wanted to hear what Koutari-san had to say, for information gathering purposes. And if I am not to be allowed, then–

"Kouta-san."

"Accepted."

Before I could say anything, Kouta-san pulled out a wireless from her coat. It was smaller than a cell phone and basically shaped like a board. There were four knobs in the place of buttons, and Kouta-san tweaked them. It was what she had used to communicate with Neo-san earlier, but as you might except of the thief Kouta-san, she had her share of secret gadgets.

"Yes – correct, Neo-san. Please, go on like that."

After exchanging two, three lines, Kouta-san received agreement – or rather, acceptance, from Neo-san.

"Then let us wait on the rooftop. Other rooms would do, but if Koutari-san were to open any doors for no reason, everything would end on the spot."

"Uh huh….." the rooftop again. "However, how would we hear them from the rooftop?"

"We shall use this wireless for that. If we keep it on a receiving channel they will not hear our voices, after all. Well, the one thing to worry about is that someone somewhere might be intercepting the radio waves….. but that is not a significant worry here."

Said Kouta-san as she began climbing the stairs to the rooftop.

"If anything, I worry more about the two of them."

"Shito-kun and Misachi-san?" I asked as I followed her in climbing the stairs. "They will not wake up for half a day, right? You beat them so unnecessarily, after all."

"My, my. It is not consummate to deliberately speak of

one like a sadist. I did not use any more violence than necessary.”

“Leaving Misachi-san aside, I think you went too far with Shito-kun. You kept striking at his internal organs. It would have sufficed to strike his head once. He will be in quite some pain for a while.”

“Keep talking as you wish. You shall find out soon enough how kind I am.”

Kouta-san replied with an inexplicable retort. We finished climbing the stairs, opened the door, and then Kouta-san took off her coat and spread it out on the ground before sitting. I did the same and sat in front of her. Kouta-san began fiddling with the knobs on the wireless.

”….. come to think of it, this place has security systems but no security cameras,” I said out of boredom. “This suits Kouta-san and I just fine, but is that not a security problem?”

“From an administrative standpoint that is more consummate,” Kouta-san answered my question without taking her eyes off the device. “There are probably some things they would rather not be recorded. For example, those MO discs had some value, but were not anything important. Basically, that is how it is.”

“Everything and everything is recorded in their individual brains…..”

To begin with, is that machine-based security really usually enough?

Kouta-san seemed to have finished tweaking the channels, as she placed the wireless device smack dab in the middle between the two of us. I could hear something that sounded like something was brushing against clothing. Perhaps Neo-san had placed a wireless in his pocket, too.

“Hmm. It’s a bit off.”

Kouta-san tilted her head to the side as she turned a knob just a bit. And then, it seemed the wireless device began picking up what sounded like a person’s voice.

”….. like….. so….. utari-San.”

“No clue.”

“However, it seems you took your time. How rare of you, Koutari-san, considering how precise you are with time.”

“For some reason the elevator was broken.”

Neo-san and Koutari-san’s voices. It did not sound like they were talking as they were walking, so it seemed they were in that private room adorned with paintings.

”….. so, what did you want, Koutari-san?”

“About the research, of course.”

And then the two of them began conversing about topics that chained together what seemed like specialized language (something ability and something circuit, and other such things of that lingo). I listened intently for a while, but there is nothing more boring than listening to words that you do not understand. This may sound rude to Neo-san and Koutari-san, but the two of us gradually began losing interest in their conversation.

”….. it seems like this was a complete waste of effort,” Kouta-san seemed to feel the way, as she mumbled in a very bored tone. “Although we did not really use much effort. Still, it is amazing that they can continue talking about such a pointless topic. Do they find it amusing?”

“Do you understand bits of it? It sounds like a foreign language to me.”

“It is because I understand bits of it that I find it boring,” Kouta-san said. “Boring even if you understand, boring if you don’t, it’s the worst.”

“I cannot shake the feeling that this is a waste of time….. I wonder if Neo-san won’t change the subject to the incident.”

“If he were to shift the subject now, it would be quite unnatural. That person has his own sets of issues. At the very least, he cannot afford to show his cards yet.”

“I understand that, but….. then, Kouta-san. Can I leave this place to you?” I stood up. “I shall head back to the cage to check on Kunagisa.”

“Dividing up now. It is not consummate to be pressing such a boring task to me, but at this point, I suppose it cannot be helped. There is the matter of the remaining time, after all.”

I looked at my watch. An hour and fifteen minutes remained.

“Ah….. but, if Kouta-san taking out Shito-kun acts as a camouflage, ….. if the Professor were to panic over it, then maybe this number will grow a bit.”

“Or it could do the opposite,” Kouta-san adjusted her cap a bit and looked at me. “The two who went to check on the seventh ward do not show any signs of returning. This is extremely suspicious. Of course, if he were to trust the two, there is a large possibility that the Professor simply thinks, *even if something were to happen, the two of them would deal with it, so in this case they are probably just investigating the ward carefully*.”

“Trust….. I think he believes them,” and then I remembered one thing. The line that Kouta-san said when she was taking on Misachi-san. “By the way, Kouta-san, what did you mean by that?”

“What do you mean by *that*?” she asked back, intentionally. “I do not remember becoming intimate

enough with you to be able to understand what your pronouns refer to. Or perhaps that is what you wish, dear friend?”

“Please do not deflect the question. You said to Misachi-san while pointing to Shito-kun. *And be used in one of the Professor’s human experiments? – like this simplistic fool lying down over here*.”

I said, mimicking Kouta-san’s sarcastic tone of voice. I felt like I replicated her voice fairly well, but for whatever reason, she simply made a face. I cleared my throat, and then forced the conversation to continue. “What did you mean by that?”

“There is no meaning or anything. It is consummate to take it literally,” Kouta-san seemed to have been extremely bothered, as she answered with a dismissive tone. “In other words, Oogaki Shito-kun was a subject just the same as Utsurigi Gaisuke. Of course, in his case, you could find plenty of replacements, so it wouldn’t be entirely accurate to call them *just the same*, but he is an extraordinary existence nonetheless.”

“Extraordinary existence.....”

That is probably the truth. I had not yet been able to see the wisdom of Shito-kun yet, but that was simply because there was no such opportunity. Him being a talented human being was proven just by the fact that he lived in this facility.

However, if the term *human experiment* that Kouta-san used matched what I imagined, then perhaps things would begin to take a different meaning. An experimental specimen for the Professor and to be a research subject. In other words,

“A **Genius Creation Project** – perhaps?” Kouta-san kept

an ear to the wireless device as she spoke in a somewhat joking tone. “However, can we speak about that when everything is over? Even you cannot think that why Oogaki Shito exists in this facility and what role he takes, has anything to do with Kunagisa Tomo and Utsurigi Gaisuke, can you?”

Maybe. I did not know. I do not know that, either. I did not know anything. I did not know anything at all.

And just then.

My thoughts froze at the words spoken by Koutari-san across the wireless device.

“Neo. About this incident.”

2

"Neo. This incident, what do you think?"

"What do I think? I don't think a thing, Koutari-san. Well, I think we're in a bit of a bind, of course. Utsurigi-san passing away leaves us without any options. Granted, the Professor seems to be scheming something."

"Scheming. That blue-haired girl."

"Yes yes, that, indeed. She is the former leader of *Cluster* after all. You could say she's even better than Utsurigi-san as **material**. And still not even 20. Much easier to handle than Utsurigi-san."

"She does not look easy to handle."

"Perhaps so. As an individual that may be the case. But you shan't forget we have the two acquaintances of hers as hostages, Koutari-san."

"Hostages. Hostages."

"Yes. Leaving aside that black-clothed woman – given that she did not seem too close to the Lady – that boy is a useful card. The lover of the direct descendant of the Kunagisa Syndicate lineage, that's an S-rank rare card that doesn't come along very often. Well, leaving aside its value, it's definitely a rare."

"Indeed. I don't understand, but that blue-haired girl seems attached to that brat."

"Yes. Although the Professor had told us to expect a girl with no emotions. Like real access to a machine. Although from an objective perspective – or at least from my perspective, she does not look like anything special. She

does not look intellectual. That black-clothed woman seems much more intellectual."

"You cannot determine one's intellect from their outward appearances….. you cannot judge someone based on their appearance."

"Well that is as you say. I understand that too, of course. I've heard enough through the grapevine about the Lady of Kunagisa's abilities. That's why I can't say I don't understand why the Professor's so desperate to frame her."

"Although it's unclear whether it's just a framing."

"You're still saying that? Well, that's true. What the Professor is doing is not entirely impossible, however difficult it may be to prove anything."

"There's no need to prove anything."

"Perhaps. You don't need to do anything as painstaking as proving it as long you just brute force things into place. The problem would be dealings with the Kunagisa Syndicate. Or shall we call it negotiations, but in either case the result would be the same. They would not remain silent if we were to try using one of them as a specimen."

"Just have to say they volunteered."

"Like with Utsurigi-san? That may be one way, but how would you get her to say that?"

"Stop forgetting what you said yourself."

"Ahh, hostages. I see. Mmhmm – that is not a bad idea. Not bad at all."

"Although we did use the same trick for that pervert, so if someone were to accuse us of being one-trick ponies we would be guilty as charged."

"That pervert? Ahh, you mean Utsurigi-san. Well, true. However there is no need to seek aesthetics for matters like this. We are not artists but scientists. And unlike Utsurigi-

san's case, this time we have a specific hostage, that boy. In other words, along with locking up the Lady of Kunagisa, we would have to lock up that boy. Would that not be the case?"

"It would. But that's a blessing."

"My, my. And how so?"

"That blue-haired girl lacks recognition of reality. In other words, it doesn't matter to her where she is. Put another way, she's everywhere and nowhere at the same time."

"A rather poetic expression for Koutari-san. Oh, excuse me, I was poking fun. Please, do go on."

"It doesn't matter whether she's at home or whether she's in this facility. As long as that brat is **by her side**."

"Oh hoh, I see. That does seem to be the case. That means that seventh ward would become their lovely nest. Although they would be kept under watch 24-7, so it does not sound so well. But it does not sound terribly bad, either."

"Although that's only the case for the blue-haired girl."

"Ah, right. The ER Program Dropout Boy does not seem satisfied just by being with the Lady of Kunagisa, after all. Well, he's a difficult boy to grasp, so I cannot say much."

"You can grasp him just fine. The problem is just that you can grasp him so well that none of it actually matters."

"Okay, you win that round. That is indeed true. As you would expect of Koutari Hinayoshi, your insight is magnificently brilliant! Hmm, as you say, even with the Lady of Kunagisa doting on him so much, the problem remains on his end. What does the Professor mean to do there? He is an individual unaffiliated with the Kunagisa Syndicate. His family and friends would fret if he were to

disappear."

"He does not seem the type to have many friends."

"That can be said. He is a quite silver-tongued and friendly boy, but that may have been brought about by his fear of coming in contact with other people – well, psychiatrists would say that, but in his case it feels like there is something much more complex going on. There is something about him that I can't place. I suppose you could say he's rather similar to the Lady of Kunagisa and Utsurigi in that sense. Most terrifying are not the human beings that can do anything, but rather the human beings you can't predict. Especially when they're young. Anyways, the contemporary world isn't carefree enough to not raise a ruckus when someone goes missing."

"If you say so. I disagree."

"Well, perhaps. The serial killer case in Kyoto where the Lady of Kunagisa lives has yet to be resolved, after all. You definitely cannot be carefree in this world. However, just because–"

"Neo. What I find problematic is not that brat but more the one you call the *black-clothed woman*."

"Oh. And why would that be? Umm, she was – Suzunashi-san, was she? Suzunashi Neon-san."

"Yes. What do you think Professor Kyouichirou intends to do with her?"

"Ahh, well you only need one hostage. But for secretiveness you cannot just let her go back. But keeping her here would cause the same problems as with the boy. In other words, her family and friends would panic."

"Has the Professor not investigated her? He was supposed to have done a background check."

"Ahh, he did say that didn't he. We didn't have time, so

he wasn't able to get much in-depth data. We didn't even know that boy partook in the ER Program until Miyoshi-san mentioned it, after all. And this place doesn't house a super extraordinary data seeker like the one said to have resided in *Cluster*. Granted, now that I think about it, if you consider the secretiveness of the ER3 System that may have been expected. Umm, so what was it? I don't remember."

"– I tried looking into it earlier, and it's not good."

"Not good? That boy's history?"

"No. Suzunashi Neon."

"Huh. What sort of history? That's curious."

"I actually came here to discuss that. I can fill you in on the details later, but it would be incredibly dangerous to try to lock up that woman."

"Do you mean that it would be more dangerous than to lock up the Lady of Kunagisa or that boy? That does not sound like good news."

"It makes me hesitate to even bring it up to the Professor. After all, that *Mad Demon* is completely caught up in working out how to frame the blue-haired girl. We might get dragged into the mess."

"Dragged in… alright then, Koutari-san. Then I have a good idea. How about this? The two of us bring forth the come up with the true suspect behind the Utsurigi-san murder. We can point our fingers like a shounen manga. *The suspect is you!* It's Koutari-san and I after all, we're a pretty good pair."

"No."

"If you say so. That's a shame. However, the problem remains, so what do you think? Do you think the Lady of Kunagisa is the suspect?"

"Who knows. It doesn't matter who the suspect is, in this

case."

"Is that so – that may indeed be the case. It may indeed be the same. However, it's quite something to kill a person. Imagining someone so vicious in this facility makes me feel goosebumps."

"*Kill one man, and you are a murderer. Kill millions of men, and you are a conqueror. Kill them all, and you are a god.* Jean Rostand's words."

"Woah. You said it first. Well, that might be true. Killing Utsurigi-san may be essentially the same as killing some hundreds of people. They did after all essentially kill the countless people that should have **followed the footsteps** of Utsurigi-san. Though they do say *the death of one man is a tragedy. The death of millions is a statistic.*"

"It's the truth."

"Indeed."

"However, there is one more thing that can be said."

"Uh huh. And what is that one? Oh don't be such a tease, Koutari-san. It's between the two of us. I'll end up skinny if you keep toying with me like that. What is that one more thing?"

"That the Utsurigi Gaisuke death was a **suicide**."

3

“That Utsurigi Gaisuke’s death was a suicide. And I don’t mean comparatively.”

I immediately froze upon hearing those words through the wireless device. I subconsciously crowded over the device, and as a result, bumped into Kouta-san’s nose. “Augh,” she yelped as she backed up a bit.

”– you can hear without being so close, dear friend. That hurt a little.”

“Sorry…..”

I absent-mindedly apologized and leaned just a bit back from the device. Even so, I could recognize that I was (meaninglessly) close to the device. I could recognize it, but still, I did not feel like backing up any more.

”………”

“Suicide? What do you mean suicide, Koutari-san?” Neo-san said with his usual, flamboyant tone. “He was obviously killed by someone else. Of course, every sealed-room case starts with a suicide theory, but that one’s pretty obviously far from any theories like that. And it was sealed because of the autolock security.”

“That’s not what I meant by suicide,” Koutari-san said with his low, mumbling voice. “Think about it, Neo. Does the Utsurigi Gaisuke we know seem like the kind of guy who’d die without putting up a fight?”

“Huh. Well, I’ve never seen him personally so I can’t really say anything. But based on phone calls and emails, and from what I’ve heard about his past, that’s probably

true. He doesn't seem like a very calm type."

Indeed, that was true. I only spoke to Utsurigi for an hour, but I could say that he had a strong sense of self esteem – if I were to borrow Kunagisa's words, he had a strong will. For better or for worse, he was a genius academic that looked down on others with self-righteousness wrapped in pride. Would that Utsurigi Gaisuke allow himself to be killed by someone? Of course not. Of course, not unless the opponent were to be *Dead Blue*.

"However, he has actually simply allowed himself to be killed," Neo-san retorted. "And not just killed, but violated beyond anything else. You know, it felt like the killer wasn't happy with just killing. In other words, couldn't it be said that because of that personality, because he was not the type to just allow himself to be killed, that he ended up like that? For us academics, anyways."

"We would have to agree to disagree, I think. However, let us return to the start," Koutari-san stoically spoke. "Why was Utsurigi Gaisuke imprisoned here?"

"The reason for his imprisonment. Well outwardly it was as a research fellow, and behind the scenes it was as a think tank for the Professor, and further behind that was as a research specimen for the Professor."

"That's not what I mean. Why Utsurigi Gaisuke himself agreed."

"Ahh – I see."

It seemed Neo-san nodded. I nodded too.

Yes, that – the reason why Utsurigi remained here. I wondered about that too. Yesterday myself, and Kunagisa, were deftly side-stepped, but it seemed Utsurigi was being blackmailed with *something* (although Utsurigi roared with

laughter when I brought that up yesterday).

“Umm, what was it. I was never actually told, so I don’t really know. But it was something like some grand crime he’d committed in the past – in other words, that he was being threatened that if we would release information about some of the crimes he’d committed while in *Cluster*?”

“No. That was the true outward farce.”

“Uh huh. I see, so we’d spread false rumors to hide the truth. As underhanded and painstakingly done as always, that Professor. So, what do you know, Koutari-san?”

“I heard from him personally before,” Koutari-san said, surprisingly. “It was probably a slip of the tongue for him – but it was about *Kunagisa Tomo’s birth*.”

Neo-san went silent for a moment at that. I went silent. I could not help but go silent. Kunagisa’s birth…..? Did Koutari-san say that just now?

Seriously?

Is that true? It must be a lie. That cannot be true. If, if we were to assume that to be the case, there was no reason for Utsurigi-san to say that to Koutari-san. That manipulative man would not leak that to anyone under the guise of a slipped tongue.

Not such a thing.

”….. what do you mean?” Neo-san asked with a forcibly joking tone. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t, either,” Koutari-san answered. “But in short, Utsurigi Gaisuke was being blackmailed with such a weakness. The blue-haired girl was and still is of great importance to Utsurigi Gaisuke. After all, she was his leader during his *Cluster* years. If he were to refuse the demands, or escape, the secret would see the light of day – well, I don’t know that for sure. It’s pretty questionable whether

even the *Mad Demon* would risk the wrath of the Kunagisa Syndicate for no gain. However–"

However, that sort of threat.

"That sort of threat has effect because it is never executed. The *what if* must remain in the back of the mind. As a result, Utsurigi Gaisuke remained – is how it was."

"Uh hu. I see – however, what of it, Koutari-san? For what reason Utsurigi-san remained here, for what reason the Professor locked up Utsurigi-san here, ultimately doesn't matter because the result is the same. Utsurigi-san no longer being here throws the outward appearance and behind-the-scenes stuff in the bin."

"However, this time that Kunagisa Tomo came here," Koutari-san said. "And that creates a contradiction. The contradiction in that he remained here for the blue-haired girl but remaining here would not be to the blue-haired girl's benefit."

"So – he committed suicide?"

"Theoretically. If he were to die, the Professor wouldn't be able to do anything about it. Blackmailing the dead is meaningless."

I could nod at Koutari-san's opinion – or rather his theory. At the very least, I could agree with it on an emotional level. We are talking about that Utsurigi who had the gall to call Kunagisa his Kaiser. If the threat had to do with Kunagisa – he may opt for death instead. If that were the case, then was yesterday's meeting more of a will? To his former leader, and then after his passing, the one who would look over that leader. That would also make what Utsurigi had said to Kunagisa yesterday, *I guess it's time to restore my reputation*, make more sense.

Not regaining honor nor clearing his name.

Restoring his reputation.

Regaining his name.

However, if one were to take another look at this, you could find another contradiction.

“However, Koutari-san,” and as expected, Neo-san was also able to pick up on that contradiction. “That’s odd. That ends up being very odd. If Utsurigi was killed – or we can call it suicide, then it placed the Lady of Kunagisa in a precarious situation. After all, she’s locked up in a cage right now and looks to be imprisoned in this facility for eternity.”

“That is as you say,” Koutari-san seemed to recognize that contradiction from the start, and accepted Neo-san’s retort. “Anyways–”

Koutari-san was about to say something when some noise interfered with the device. The sound was terribly hair-raising, and I could not stop myself from turning down the volume. We could no longer hear Koutari-san or Neo-san’s voices.

”– did it break?”

“No, a phone call,” Kouta-san said calmly. “There was a phone in that room, right? There was probably a call to that from somewhere. Even landline phones create radio waves, however little. It’s the same reason why cell phones have interference when used next to a computer. The radio waves collide, and because this one was weaker, it lost, I guess.”

“You guess. This is rather delicate, it seems,” I thought, exasperated, and leaned back and sat down on the rooftop. ”….. Neo-san seemed to be putting in some effort to get more out of Koutari-san….. but there is not much progress.”

“Do you think so? It sounded rather important.”

“Well it was certainly important,” I nodded at Kouta-san. “From a subjective standpoint I could agree with the notion that Utsurigi’s death was suicide. I could agree, however, this is not the time to be debating such possibilities. It is acceptable to discuss this when there is time to spare….. but right now, the reality is that Utsurigi was killed by someone. That cannot be refuted. You cannot commit suicide that way. Whether you let yourself be killed or put up a fight as you are killed, you are still killed.”

“Hmm….. that may be,” Kouta-san crossed her arms. “However, what did they mean by *Kunagisa Tomo’s birth*? Do you know?”

“No, I do not.”

Immediate response. However, no matter how you look at it, it was too immediate. Kouta-san looked at me with suspicion. I did not care. Regardless of whether it is an obvious lie, I do not take back what I have said. I must not.

“Well, we shall leave it at that. There is no point delving into Kunagisa-san’s matters…..” after glaring at each other for a few seconds, Kouta-san was the one who gave up. ”….. still, they are having a long phone call. I would imagine they should be hanging up just about now. Or perhaps it truly did break.”

Kouta-san began tweaking the device. I looked at that Kouta-san from the corner of my eye and sighed once again. Ever since I stepped foot inside this facility, aside from when I was asleep, I felt like I sighed at least once an hour. I dislike and am uncomfortable with losing control of my emotions, but the waves are hard to hold off. Staying here for another three days would probably cause me to go insane. Or perhaps I already am in that process. I thought

that while thinking back on my actions to this point.

I looked at my watch. Precisely one hour remaining.

“Ah. It connected.”

Kouta-san said as she placed the device back on the ground. I straightened myself, having been leaning back, and then leaned my face in toward the device again.

”….. …..– what?”

“Well, you see,” Neo-san said with extraordinary clarity. “Listen carefully, Koutari-san. This is extremely important.”

”? What?”

“That was from the Professor. Apparently we’ve got a crisis. And not just any crisis, an extreme crisis, a crisis of a hundred years.”

So said Neo-san with a bit of an old-fashioned choice of words, but it was oddly enunciated. Yes. As if. As if he were making sure he were communicating to Kouta-san and myself listening in through a wireless device. As if there was something he needed to tell us no matter what.

Naturally, his throat began sounding.

Kouta-san also leaned forward to listen.

“The boy that accompanied the Lady of Kunagisa – has disappeared.”

First, I struggled to make a decision. And the next moment.

I had already spun my body around. Running. Without thinking. Jumped across the two-meter gap between the fifth ward and fourth ward with one step, and landed on the rooftop of the fourth ward. And then continued running to the door. Could hear a voice from behind. Kouta-san’s voice. Saying something. Could not hear. No time to hear. Pulled the knob to open the door into the ward, but it was locked and stopped. Who cares. Concentrated my strength

and kicked the area near the knob. Even if the door itself is sturdy, if you continue to apply impact on areas where moving parts meet, it is easy to destroy this sort of lock. Who said that again? Do not remember. Someone over across. Problem is that it leaves proof, but who cares about proof. Now that they know.

After some number of kicks, the door opened. Was destroyed.

”– what the heck.”

The one remaining hour. That was blown away like paper shreds. Why did they find out about my absence. Why. Perhaps Kasugai-san went back to the basement. Or perhaps Shito-kun or Misachi-san woke up earlier than expected. No, come to think of it, Misachi-san had already fired a shot before then. That sound may have reached someone. Maybe Kokoromi-sensei had alerted the Professor. Or perhaps my phone call to Hime-chan had been spotted in the records. And perhaps someone found it suspicious. Any of them seemed plausible, yet all of them were unnatural theories. However there is no reality that is fully naturally. This is the reality. Shit, what good are words, reason? That is all they are, a pile of over-thinking and misunderstanding and tunnel-visioning.

Already found out, there was no reason not to use the elevator. However, there is no elevator shaft leading to the rooftop, so I had to use the stairs. First the fourth floor, and then the elevator. I decided that much and then took a step toward the stairs.

And then my shoulder was grabbed from behind.

It was Kouta-san.

”– where do you think you’re going?”

Kouta-san’s voice was a bit disheveled. It was apparently

no simple task even for Kouta-san to have caught up across this distance after I had a head start. Ahh, right. I took too much time breaking the door. Shit. I don't have time to be dealing with you.

"– there is nothing you can do by returning to the cage now."

Nothing? Is that so? Perhaps. Probably. Kouta-san was saying the correct thing. Nothing will happen by returning. That is not wrong. But **that is why** I need to return. I tried to shake off Kouta-san's hand. However, I could not shake off her firm grip.

".... I am grateful to you, Ishimaru Kouta-san," I said, as if I were growling. "Really, because of you, I was able to not lose hope these few hours. I was able to dream that I still have a path before me. That is why I am grateful."

"Why're you going on like you're about to die?" Kouta-san forced me to turn around. "It is not as if hope has been lost. No, now that we've been found, you are the only hope remaining. For Kunagisa-san and Suzunashi-san, and for yourself. Yet you're going to throw that away yourself?"

"I am not throwing it away. I am just returning things," I answered automatically. "From here on out you are no longer relevant. That is why–"

A dry sound echoed. It took about three seconds for me to realize Kouta-san had slapped me. It did not hurt at all. I had been excited so much that it seemed my senses had completely gone numb. However, it was hot.

"Not relevant? After acting together for several hours, you still have the galls to say I have nothing to do with this? You–" Kouta-san also became enraged, yet she lowered her voice, forcing herself to control her emotions. "..... you are going quite off-track."

”– I am told that a lot,” I nodded slowly. “Really, a lot.”

“Do you remember what I told you on the rooftop of the seventh ward? If you decide to act on your own again, I shall break off the alliance.”

“Please do, it has no bearing on me,” I bowed my head. “Thank you for all the help you have giv-”

I was not able to finish. Because Kouta-san pushed me back. I fell down the stairs from my back, and without being able to brace myself was slammed against thirteen steps until I spilled out onto the landing. I finally stopped after crashing into the wall, and mumbled, “Ow that hurt.” But in truth it did not hurt. If anything I felt relieved. I felt like it was the first time I had felt unrestrained since entering this facility.

And then something rained down from above. By my feet, it clattered. It was that lock-picking knife, the anti-lock blade. I looked at it, and then looked back up. There stood Kouta-san, keeping her follow-through after throwing the knife.

“A parting gift, dear friend,” she said her parting words with a reluctant, truly reluctant tone. “Because you should avoid kicking down doors. It hurts your body. And that knife can be used as a weapon. The knife in your right pocket is not enough, is it? I recommend not using the pistol. But all of this may be pointless and an unnecessary bother.”

”——”

I opened my mouth, but I was unable to say anything to the disappearing Kouta-san. Eventually, I could not see her anymore, and I picked up the knife. And then I stood up. It appeared I suffered no broken bones or bruises. It seemed she had skillfully knocked me down, that Ishimaru Kouta-

san, I thought as I looked at the knife. I thought as I remembered the lady who called me a friend until the very end. When all was said and done, I had simply used her, and was unable to return the favor. That was my one regret. However, that may not be limited to just her. They say you should interact with people, but I have always siphoned away from others, and burdened them. If even one person I encountered did not exist to this point in my life, I would probably be long dead.

That was why.

“I need to put an end, to even nonsense.....”

Yes. Return. Return everything.

Just a bit, everything. All half.

Like when I first met that blue boy.

Like before that meeting.

I hated deciding. I hated choosing. I was unable to be interested in others. I was unable to be interested in myself. I hated conflict with people. I hated being laughed at. I could not laugh. I could not cry. I could not enjoy nor get angry. I could not do anything. I did not feel anything. I did not attain anything. I broke them because I could. I wanted them but I could not so I destroyed them. I wanted them so I threw them away. I wanted to trust them so I betrayed them. I liked them so I rejected them. I wanted to protect them so I hurt them. It felt homely so I escaped. We were friendly so I was lonely. I was envious so I crushed them. Necessities until they were unnecessary. Fondness until hatred. I acted like a cold person. I acted like a shallow person. I acted like a wise person. I acted like a smart person. I acted like a foolish person. I acted like a person. I mimicked someone else. I was unable to mimic someone else. I admired someone else. I hated myself. I tried to like

myself. I tried to like someone else. I tried to love someone else. I could not love someone other than myself. I could not love myself. I did not know how to love or be loved, equally. That was why I ran. But I could not escape. From anywhere. From anyone.

Life sucked.

”….. so let’s have a masterpiece.”

I’ll kill them, slice them to bits, line them all up, trim them down to size – and set them out for all the world to see.

I felt quiet.

I confirmed the knife in the pocket of my coat, and then with the lock-picking knife in my left hand, I began climbing the stairs.

Began falling down the stairs.

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1) Famous katana

2) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uir%C5%8D

3) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yokan

4) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Osamu_Dazai

5) http://www.amazon.com/imogayu-Japanese-Edition-Akutagawa-Ryunosuke-ebook/dp/B00DXJBR52

二日目（6）——たったひとつの冴えないやりかた

Day 2 (6)

The One Stupid Means

0

Other people determine your value.
Other people also determine other peoples' values.

1

I ended up using the stairs to the ground floor. I walked out to the hallway of the fourth floor once, but the elevator was stopped at the ground floor, and even in my excited state, I was able to reason that it would be faster to simply run down the stairs. Not that I was in any excited state. I was so calm that my body temperature was around zero degrees.

I fell down the stairs two, three times, and crashed into the landing. But I was able to immediately stand up. I was probably not getting off without a scratch, but it did not hurt much. Having come this far, it seems I had finally gotten somewhere. Although there is no way human beings can control their nervous system, at the very least, I was doing something similar. Speaking of which, when life forms take fatal damage – for example, when half their head has been crushed, or when they have been split in half at the torso, in such cases – I have heard that their nervous

system gets cut off. They only have a few minutes left to live no matter what happens, so their body decides it is useless to send signals warning of impending doom. That made me feel much more pleased. It is a nasty story, but it made me feel very pleased. There is no value to pain to those who do not fear death. With just one decision, life forms can become this strong. Or perhaps, just by throwing away one decision, life forms can become this weak. Either way, I felt that it was splendid. I thought that as I picked myself up off the wall after my fourth slip.

It did not hurt nor itch to tumble – well, really it left a bit of an itchy feeling – which I was grateful about, but it was problematic that I could not walk properly. It felt like my feet were not touching the ground. I felt extremely unstable. As if I were floating in a zero-gravity field. Speaking of which, a long time ago – before I participated in the ER3 System's ER Program – when I was thirteen, with Kunagisa Tomo, we talked about that. Whether by the time we became adults people would be able to travel to space with ease. They might be able to. Do you want to go? Not really. Not interested. How about you, Kunagisa-kun? I want to go. Mmhmm. You want to go despite being a hikikomori? A pretty distasteful being. What's distasteful? A pathetic life form. I'm not pathetic. Maybe. But space is pathetic. There is nothing worth anything in this world, anyways. There is nothing worth anything anywhere. Nowhere? Nowhere. Even if you go to space, if you look at Earth, you just think, "it's blue." That is all you think by going to space, you know? If you want to see that, you can just look at a picture book. Not just blue, but red, black, green, everything is there. Going to space is just a roundabout way of confirming how insignificant you are.

The extreme result of romanticism. It would be better to just look at your hair then. Eheheh. Stop laughing for no reason like that. Disturbing. I hate that about you. I love that you say stuff like that. Oh shut up.

”– stop trying to flirt.....”

A truly pitiful brat. I thought that myself. So conceited, so conceited, so conceited. So ecstatic, so ecstatic, so ecstatic. And misconstruing that as ego. Seeing just the surface of the world, or perhaps seeing just the back of the world. In any case, just looking at one side of things. Feeling wise after having a limited perspective and speaking as if having seen enlightenment. Afraid beyond afraid of having a hollow self crumbled to bits. And what remained after crumbling was nothing. The hollow self had become myself. A tragedy, a farce that did not elicit laughs nor tears. And the farce has not yet come to an end. It continues, forever. Forever, frozen. In other words, I have not grown one bit since being gripped by *Dead Blue*. I have not accomplished anything. Because there are other things to be accomplished.

Fifth tumble. At the same time, I arrived on the ground floor. It seemed this time I hit my head pretty hard. As usual, the pain was just a dull thing, but my consciousness seemed to wane just a bit. And again I had a flashback. First, my family. Little sister. Big sister. Father. Mother. Uncle and aunt on both sides. Memories of my childhood. I could not recall the face of a single friend. I did not know of any. No one know of me. Accident. Crumbling. Plane. My little sister disappears around then. Good bye. Kasumioka-san. Nao-san. And then Kunagisa Tomo. Everything else disappeared. Was this also a revolving lantern? I do not know the meaning of the word. ER3

System. Meeting Kokoromi-sensei. The classmates I could not get along with. The few classmates I did get along with. Omokage Magokoro. Parting with sensei. And then a lot happened. I could not remember most of that. If I could, my head would explode. Dropping out. Japan. Kyoto. Reunion with Kunagisa Tomo. The same Kunagisa as before. The same myself as before. Asano Miiko-san. Suzunashi Neon-san. Pateren-san and the run-away siblings. What happened to her after she left for Tokyo. Hashima drenched by crows. The style-less artist. The decapitated Fool. The unstable cook. The unpleasant fortune-teller. He, the same. The wandering Lady and the triplet maids. I want to see them. Aikawa Jun-san. Mankind's strongest contractor. May. Meeting them. And contact with the human failure. Pointless conversations. Conversations without self-love. The worst witch, Nanananami Nanami. The girl who calls me Master appears – when my memories caught up to Hime-chan, I snapped back to reality. What the hell, I mumbled. I mumbled, consciously. I remember a lot. Jeez, my memory is not completely useless after all. Really, jeez. I picked myself up off the ground. I picked up the lock-picking knife that had clattered away from the ground, and slid it into the keyhole on the doorknob. And then after shaking a bit, the lock easily clicked. I gripped the knob. I still could not feel anything. Given how my body was functioning, there did not seem to be any broken bones. It was a careless conclusion, but I decided to believe that, and opened the door.

Dim, though a light source was attached to the ceiling. Just a luminescent bulb that seemed like it would cut out any moment, in the basement of the fourth ward that I stepped out into. As soon as I walked out, I heard voices

from somewhere. Relieved. It seemed my hearing had not yet gone numb. I thought my eardrums may have burst from tumbling so much, but it was a needless worry. I perked my ears.

"— I ——— . ———- so ——"

This voice – who? It was terrible monotone, as unemotional as if a synthetic voice were speaking, and there was no break between the words. Kasugai-san. Kasugai-san is here. Where? Ahead. Of course, by the cages ahead.

"– if that boy has gone somewhere it means I am at fault. That would cause me some trouble. That's why I must ask you. Understand?"

Kasugai-san's voice. Calm – well, it was not so much, but it was also not very angry. I carefully, keeping my footsteps silent and my breathing inaudible, one step at a time, slowly progressed down the hallway. I was suddenly beset by a headache. I may have hurt my brain a bit with one of my tumbles. Not that it matters. Not that it matters for a brain that was broken from the start. Not that it matters, so please, wait a bit. Just wait a little bit more. I want some time. There is still something I need to do.

That was when I almost burst out laughing. That was when I almost burst out laughing for the first time in a while. Something I need to do. Me! For of all people me to end up with something like that. Even a child who has abandoned every sense of obligation and every right can end up with something like that! Then, perhaps in the end I did not simply stop moving. Perhaps, to this point, I had simply acted as if I did not notice. It was probably the latter. In other words, that means that even more than I had ever realized, and even more than anyone else has

realized, I am a giant fool.

In the end, however, I did not laugh.

“Who knows?”

A nostalgic voice. I had only been gone for a few hours, but Suzunashi-san’s voice sounded nostalgic to my ears.

“Maybe he went home? Maybe he got too angry at this treatment. Inoji was raised pretty extravagantly, despite how he looks, so maybe he just couldn’t stand being here for a second longer.”

”– I am not kidding,” Kasugai-san’s voice remained emotionless. There was no anger or sadness or hesitation or anything. “How could he have left. And if he left you must have all seen him leave. How did that boy escape? Perhaps that means there is an insider here.”

Strange, I could hear some growling behind Kasugai-san’s voice. Like some beast. Kasugai-san was not the one growling. Nor Suzunashi-san. Then who? Kunagisa? I felt like my legs were falling asleep. No, not my legs. My whole body. As if the sense of pain I had sealed away was just coming back.

“Now that you mention it.”

Woah.

“Boku-sama-chan saw. Ii-chan dislocated all of his joints and slid out through that crack. Ii-chan’s so cool, you never know what he’s going to do.”

I was freed from my numbness. Relief. Kunagisa was still safe. However, the growling continued along with Kunagisa’s words. What is it? Is there someone else? No, I did not sense another. While my inward senses were numbed, my outward senses were amplified a hundred, two hundred times. Then. I must do something while Kasugai-san is the only one in front of that cage.

I tried to think. Is there any good idea that I can use? I used about two seconds to think, and then I quickly shook my head. I used three whole hours thinking, and yet I was unable to come up with anything, so I could not think there any point in trying to think now. Then there is no need to think. My body automatically, without thinking, will move, I hope. Will move, I pray.

I turned the corner, and began stepping out toward the voice. Yes, if I turn the corner, I will be by the cage with Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san–

”—-.....”

And then. There was Kasugai-san. In a white lab coat. She looked at me with that cool gaze of hers. By her feet was one dog. The dog that was playing with me last night. Ahh, so that is the beast behind the growling. Black and big and vicious. Like last night, there was no chain, nor even a collar. Why had she taken a dog to this floor. I did not know what Kasugai-san wanted. That was why I naturally returned my gaze to Kasugai-san. She looked a bit startled, but without showing that inner expression, she simply said, ”– my.”

“Why did you–”

“Ah, Ii-chan!” Kunagisa clasped the bars of the cage with an out-of-place happy voice. “Yahoo! Ii-chan! Welcome back!”

I could not respond to that voice. I simply faced Kasugai-san. But I also could not completely ignore her and glanced at Kunagisa in the cage. She looked well. At the very least, it did not look like she had been harmed any. It seemed I had made it. Probably, had made it. Suzunashi-san was there too. Calmly, with composure, she leaned against the wall. But she looked at me, said “jeez,” and then, ”..... so,”

she continued quietly.

“Inoji. By how you look, it doesn’t look like you’re all ready.”

“Ah. You’re right. Ii-chan, you’re pretty hurt. Your skin’s peeled all over. And bleeding. You okay?”

What Suzunashi-san meant was, of course, with regards to the case. However, Kunagisa did not seem to care about that all, and instead worried about my health. As usual. Kunagisa never worries about herself. Why. I did not know.

I took out the lock-picking knife, and with unstable footing (….. I meant to be, walking, though…..) walked closer to the cage. Huh. The key is open. Why? Perhaps Kasugai-san had opened it. I looked at Kasugai-san.

“Hey – I’d rather you not do anything. Don’t move.”

She said something. I cannot hear. Maybe my eardrums had burst after all. I can hear but I do not understand what she is saying. I understand what she is saying but I do not know what it means. It was like easy-to-hear French. Oh well. There is nothing to be gained from hearing Kasugai-san’s voice. I opened the door of the cage.

“Lets go home, Tomo.”

“What? Ah, yup–”

Kunagisa hesitated. How rare. Huh. Did I say something strange? We are just going home together. Like always. Go somewhere together and then go home together. That is all. Ahh, right, I need to buy uirō on the way home. For Hime-chan’s friend. Miiko-san will probably want some too, so six or seven bars.

Someone pulled my shoulder. Kasugai-san.

”– please go inside like that. I’ll try not to treat you badly.”

“Shut up or I’ll kill you.”

I turned around and shook Kasugai-san's hand off.

"Please don't get in my way. We're heading home now."

"I won't let you."

Kasugai-san did not back down, and pushed me with one arm. Pushed, I stumbled two, three steps away from the cage. Away from Kunagisa. Ahh, I have to go back. But I was obstructed. By Kasugai-san – and one dog.

And then I realized. The black dog by Kasugai-san's feet was not from last night. Looks the same, but feels totally different. Not even just like a wild beast. It was precisely a wild beast. As if glaring, as if staring at the face of an archenemy, it pointed its two eyes at me. Its front legs postured, prepared to lunge at any moment. Its weight lowered onto its back legs just a bit, as if prepared against any attack. Compared to **this**, the two dogs from last night were like domesticated puppies. They wore the same skin, but this was a completely differently life form.

"The last – of the triplet."

"Precisely."

Kasugai-san looked down just a bit at the dog.

"Of course **this** is nothing like the two you met last night and is not nearly as docile. That is the result of experimentation, you know."

The result of experimentation? What sort of experimentation must be conducted to transform one that shares the same genes to this degree? I felt like she mentioned something yesterday. I also felt that she did not say anything. I cannot remember. There is no point in remembering. What is more important is what Kasugai-san wants to do using this dog. What she meant to do to Kunagisa using this dog.

"What – are you thinking," I asked Kasugai-san.

"Bringing such a wild dog along – this is no longer a joke."

"It's your fault for escaping. If only you stayed put," Kasugai-san casually answered, without any hesitation or conflict. "Now hurry up and enter the cage please. I would rather not do something like this either. But if you won't, I will. That's all."

Ordinary.

Kasugai-san's way of speaking was far too ordinary.

In this extraordinary place.

In this extraordinary situation.

It was this, ordinary.

"– I see. I get it….. **I get it**, you are like **that**, too."

I finally understood.

….. what Neo-san meant when he said *be careful especially of Kasugai-san*. Finally, in this situation, I comprehended.

I see, I see….. so that is how it is. What it means to have no conviction. It ultimately means nothing other than that she can do anything. She has no restrictions. She has no obligations. And thus she has no boundaries. That is the the identity of this Kasugai Kasuga. Reason or theory, theory or conclusions, nothing has any meaning.

She chose nothing herself, she decided nothing herself, and that resulted in this. She binds other people without care, imprisons them, and hurts them. And that was not for any conviction of hers. Because she has none.

Professor Kyouichirou acts for his own research. Kokoromi-sensei assisted the professor for her goals, and revolts for those goals. Shito-kun and Misachi-san assisted the professor for their own sense of loyalty, and because of that sense of loyalty, easily crumbled.

But Kasugai-san is different.

She has no reason. No motive. No reason from the start. There is no understanding her, forever. If I had to describe it as anything, she is simply psychological. Incorrigible. There is no handling her. If I were to have arrived late, and she were to have set the dog free inside the cage, she would not be any different. Even if that were to ultimately kill Kunagisa, she would not be any different. She has no goals nor means, no guilt nor repentance. There is no negotiating. There is no placating or converting or threatening.

There is no conviction.

As Neo-san said, that is indeed terrifying.

However.

"That would mean she is just like me–"

I stuck my hand in my left breast pocket, and pulled out the knife. The lock-picking knife in my left hand, and the thin blade I received from Aikawa-san in my right. I faced Kasugai-san with this setup. She did not look at me with any sort of surprise, and without any sort of emotion.

"I do not think there is any point in meaningless resistance."

"Meaningless?"

"There is no meaning whatsoever. The Professor and the other researchers will be here soon. What will you do by breaking through me? Nothing."

"It is not nothing at all," I took a step closer. There was less than two meters to Kasugai-san. There is no point in using the pistol at this range. There was Kouta-san's warning, but I was also not foolish enough to use it without any practice. Even if this action of mine were to be even more foolish. "I will break through you, and then break through the Professor, and the other researchers. That is my

plan.”

“You’re insane.”

Are you seriously one to talk?

Before I could retort, Kasugai-san had snapped her fingers. And then the black dog twisted itself in motion. The snapped finger was a signal. As you would expect of Kasugai-san, a biologist. However, it was not an entirely unexpected or entirely a surprise – so without losing my cool, I jumped back with my right foot about three steps’ length. The black dog stopped in front of her, as if it meant to protect her.

“As your senior, I shall warn you that if it bites you, it’s over. I can hold him back for now – or should I say muzzle him? Either way, I can restrain him for now.”

I ignored Kasugai-san and faced the black dog. Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san said nothing. They were not in my sight, so I could not see their expression. Or perhaps they were saying something, but I could not hear them at the least .

Ahh – perhaps I have gone mad.

To not even be able to hear Kunagisa’s voice.

“I feel truly pleased….. truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly truly.”

I threw away the lock-picking knife. Clang, the dry sound echoed down the hallway. The black dog responded a bit to that sound, but it did not lunge. I stood no chance with both hands occupied against a dog like this. One blade is enough.

“I see – I see. You’re serious. I’m just a bit disappointed,” Kasugai-san said while seemingly, truly just a bit, but truly nonetheless, disappointed. “I thought you and I could get along.”

"I only thought that just now, Kasugai Kasuga-san."

"– break it."

That was the signal. The black dog unleashed its pent-up momentum like it was exploding, opening its mouth as it lunged toward me. I see. It was not standing in front of Kasugai-san to protect her. It was showing that it wanted to destroy me. I had completely misunderstood it. There was no way to survive for me, given that I nonchalantly and ignorantly chatted with Kasugai-san. There was not, but my body moved anyways. Faster than I could think, it quickly moved.

Even I thought it was abnormal. I put out my left arm toward the mouth of that lunging black dog. To be more precise, I threw a full-body punch with so much force that one might wonder if I wanted to take out its jaw into its opened mouth that sought to rip out my throat. In the end, the legs of a dog are simply a means of movement and serve no other purpose. As a predatory animal its only weapons are its teeth – and as Kasugai-san herself let slip, only its teeth. That means it is easy to predict its path, and if you can predict its path, it is likewise easy to seal it away. And then, tragically, the habit of dogs is to not let go once it has clamped its jaws shut. Especially if its teeth have sunk into its target.

Well, that would be about it if I were to logically explain, but it was not like I was thinking anything of the sort. Simply put, the opponent opened its mouth, so I shot my arm in.

However, despite that preemptive strike, I was knocked on my back. It seems even having all my weight behind my arm was not enough to push the dog back. It appears there is a fundamental difference between the strength of humans

and animals. I was pushed down on my back, and the dog ended up pinning me down. It was just like last night. However, last night there were two, and yet it was still less strenuous. Having succeeded in tackling me, the black dog pushed down on my chest with its front legs. And then it clamped down harder with its jaw locked over my left arm.

The black dog continued to clenched its teeth with more strength. As expected, it did not show any signs of wanting to let go. Well of course, it bit me through the jacket, and I had even twisted it around its mouth. It would not be able to pull its teeth out very easily. Not that this was a particularly good situation for me. If it cannot pull its teeth out, it simply needs to bite my arm off. Of course, I have a clump of muscle there, so even a large dog would have trouble just biting off my arm. Still, it would be able to crush the bones of my arm. It has enough strength for that. I could tell by its front legs pressing down on me. My nerves went haywire from the pain, and I could not resist. I could not think properly, and I was left screaming and waiting for the opponent to move – well, **normally** that would be what would happen.

But I do not currently feel any pain.

I feel nothing even having been tackled and having my arm crushed. I feel nothing. I do not feel anything. I just thought it was a shame that my left arm, which had just healed, would once again be unusable. I swung my right arm up. I swung my right arm, holding the knife, up. No mercy. The black dog realized. But it could do nothing. You were the one that sunk your teeth so deep. Regardless of the what, you need to take responsibility for things of your doing. Is that not right?

Seriously.

We are both in such crappy positions.

I stabbed the knife deep into the left eye of the black dog, into that large, black eyeball. There was almost no resistance as it crushed the socket, and I think it reached the brain of the black dog. It did not scream. In exchange, it sank its teeth into my arm with yet more strength. The muscles had long-since been destroyed, and it felt like its teeth were penetrating my bones. At this rate, I would not be exaggerating to say that it would crush my arm. Destroying the brain does not cause a life form to immediately die. Shit, how much longer? How much longer will it take for this thing to die? How long will my body last? How long will my consciousness last? Shit. Not enough destruction. Still not enough destruction. Gotta destroy. Destroy. Destroy destroy destroy. Destroy more and more. This most miserable. Too miserable life. Too miserable dream. Reality. With the rest of my strength, I used my muscles, and lifted by upper body.

”– GAAAAAAAAAAH!”

I re-gripped the knife with my right hand, and then drew a line from the skull to the torso. The opposite left arm, as if using the torque of my upper body, pulled back. In other words, my right arm dragged the knife forward, and my left arm pulled the body of the black dog – the black dog along with its teeth – abruptly backward, pulling it asunder, and with twice the power of one arm, moved the knife. The sound of bone being cut, the sound of blood vessels being ripped, the sound of skin being torn. Echoed. Perhaps my eardrums had resumed functioning, because that sound unpleasantly, yet somehow pleasantly, echoed.

Once I had dragged the knife halfway through the black torso, I pulled it out with a tremendous amount of force.

Suddenly, blood began splattering. On my head. Over my body. The insides of the black dog spurted out. The black insides. The insides, like darkness was flowing forth.

Sparkling.

”– ha… ah—-”

Crumpled.

My body toppled over. I did not mean to topple over but it did. Like a battery that had run dry. Required recharging. However. My body no longer moved. The black dog fell over my body, scattering its insides. Heavy. Terribly heavy. My eyelids were heavy. Sleepy. Wanted to sleep. Wanted to go to sleep. Not yet. Not yet. Nothing has ended yet.

Clap. Clap clap.

The sound of applause.

”– amazing. You. I’m a bit in awe,” Kasugai-san said. “Perhaps I should call it moved. It’s amazing you won against such a big wild dog – but I think it’s more amazing that you can kill an animal without batting an eye. That’s pretty hard – you know. Ahh but I’m leaving aside the idiots that don’t know the value of lives though alright? To comprehend what it means to take a life and to still be able to take a life is amazing. A fool not mindful of life yet a fool that minds life or something.”

“It is a great honor to be praised by you,” I answered, panting. Was I able to enunciate properly? I do not know. ”– so. Please step aside and let us through. You don’t want to die too, do you?”

“You’re right. I think I don’t want to die after having been able to meet someone like you. But I can’t really just stand here and look unaffected after having my dog get killed….. and listen.”

Kasugai-san motioned with her hands to make as if she

was listening in on something. And the reason for that was revealed the next moment. Ding. The sound of the elevator arriving on this floor, that was the sound that I heard. Elevator. It was on the ground floor when I checked when I was on the fourth floor. That the elevator that used to be on the ground floor has arrived on the ground floor means that it is on the back end of a round trip. And that it went on a round trip meant that someone was on it.

That someone was coming.

“Time’s up – you know.”

I could sense a bit of sympathy from Kasugai-san’s words. Though perhaps I was misunderstanding her. I raised my head. And then I looked at Kunagisa inside the cage. I could not see Suzunashi-san. Where did she go? Did she go somewhere? I only looked at Kunagisa.

At my Kunagisa Tomo.

Huh. Why? Why are you making such a tearful face? You are not supposed to be able to make a face like that, are you? You are always laughing. Laughing innocently. Always smiling at me no matter what. Always grinning at me no matter where. You have to be laughing happily. In enjoyment. Why? I do not understand, Kunagisa-kun. That face of yours, I have only seen it.

A single time.

Once.

….. only.

The sound of someone running over. I angled my neck to look in that direction. It was not one person. There were many. At the front was Professor Shadou Kyouichirou. Behind that was Neo Furuara-san. Koutari Hinayoshi-san. Huh. And behind that was none other than Oogaki Shito-kun. And to his side was Uze Misachi-san. Wow. They

already woke up. Then Kasugai-san may have checked the cage because they sent a warning. Maybe it was bad to have left Shito-kun next to the entrance. Though I was not sure. And behind the two was Miyoshi Kokoromi-sensei. Ahh. Then because Kasugai-san is already here, that meant everyone had gathered.

Maybe it is over.

I thought.

It is over.

I understood.

“In the end–”

Kasugai-san said.

”– what did you want?”

It was a question.

A terribly knowing, a terrible precise, and probably, in the entire world, only Kasugai-san could ask me that simply, clear question.

”– Love.”

I mumbled.

I did not answer, but I mumbled.

“I wanted, love–”

It was a pleasant feeling. I wanted to laugh. Really, wanted to laugh.

I used my free right hand to raise my body. And then I tried to stand up. Alright then. Let me do one last struggle. My relentlessness is my sales point. My blood-covered body. My bloodied mind. My clothing felt disgusting. My thoughts were also disgusting. But I also felt like this was all I could do. I looked at the knife. As expected of a knife given directly by mankind’s strongest contractor. Despite all that destruction, it did not have a single nick. Maybe this would be easy.

To rip my neck off.

I looked at Kunagisa.

As expected, Kunagisa looked like she was about to cry. She was clutching at the cage, and mostly crying. But she was still unable to cry. It was a painful expression that crossed crying with laughing. Right. Just as I cannot laugh, she cannot cry. Just like me, she cannot cry. She does not know how to mourn. That was when she ended up with such an ugly expression. And that was terribly disappointing. I wanted to see Kunagisa's innocent, naturally pure smile in the end.

Ahh, but.

That.

Would be seeking the moon.

I realized my left arm was heavy.

The black dog, which had already scattered its life somewhere, still had its fangs stuck in my arm. I remembered Utsurigi. I remembered Utsurigi's corpse. The brain destroyed by having a scissors plunged into his eyes, his mouth, breast, and stomach cut apart, his legs impaled, his body arms sliced off, that Utsurigi Gaisuke. It seems subconsciously I had performed the exact same actions as that crime suspect. How terribly ironic. Then in truth, perhaps I was the suspect.

Well, none of that really matters at this point. Whether the action happened is not a problem. It is whether the recognition is there. That was all. The footsteps came closer. My eyes were clouded over a bit so I could not tell how far they were. But I was truly out of time. I kept hold of the knife as I put my hand to the mouth of the black dog. It was a little hard to move like this. And I felt bad to leave this by just having it dangling like this forever. I felt bad

for it, so I decided to rip it off. Yet strangely it was so stuck that it did not come off easily. No, this is not stuck, but rather its teeth are lodged in too deep. And it stiffened. Yes, in other words, a cadaveric spasm. A cadaveric spasm, the result of a violent death. I had just talked about it with sensei a couple hours ago, but I could not imagine then that I would see it like this.

”– huh–”

And, as I was about to destroy the mouth of the black dog with the knife, when I had slid the knife into the gap, this time I froze. I had to freeze.

Did I just say **cadaveric spasm**? Did I say that?

”– you! What’re you doing!”

Shito-kun’s voice echoed around the hallway. However, that was meaningless to me. That was meaningless to me, having been frozen. My eardrum did not even vibrate. Wait a second. Think. Think. Calm down. No, do not calm down. Hurry. Right there. Reach out. With your arm. Just a bit, right there. Just a little bit more.

In other words….. **is that how it was?**

I did not notice myself letting go of the knife. It fell.

Utsurigi Gaisuke. If. If that was the type of human being I think. That conversation yesterday. Utsurigi Gaisuke. *Malignant Bacteria*. Green Green Green. *Cluster*. Cracker. The reality that you would not imagine Utsurigi to quietly let himself be killed. For Kunagisa Tomo. For just that reason, the man that was obedient toward Professor Kyouichirou. The once and former comrade of Kunagisa Tomo.

Crucifixion.

It that was just priming.

If that was not a mirage but a priming.

“Hey, you! You! Are you listening?”

Thump, someone pushed me. Probably Shito-kun. That body of mine that I had finally pulled off the ground became intimate with it again. It hurt. My sense of pain was rejuvenating. It seemed by nervous system was coming back online. My whole body hurt. Especially my arm. Of course. Probably half my muscle had been ripped into. I will not complain. I did take the opponent’s life, after all.

Belatedly, I felt bad for it.

However, it was not particularly wrong.

You were not wrong.

You were not wrong but your life died.

Not wrong.

Not wrong.

“Hey Kasugai – what is this–” “Haa – well you know– –” “Whatcha doin– hey man–” ” wait–” ”– explain yourself– –” ”….. dog…..” ”—-” ” blood—-fang ” ” medi cation ”

“Can you please shut up for a moment, everyone.”

I quietly said.

“Right now, for the first time since I was born, I feel like praising myself. Yes, I understand it might just be a delusion. I understand. I do not care if it is a delusion. So please, let me taste this feeling for just a little bit more–”

But that was not allowed. Even that wish was not allowed. I was slowly beginning to lose consciousness. This time, because of relief. But I thought I might not be able to wake up anymore.

Might not be able to wake up…..

Well, that sounds pretty good.

I feel so happy right now.

”……………”

What my fading sight finally glimpsed at the end was

Kunagisa Tomo again. It was fading so I could no longer see anything, but my sight was blue.

Pure,

Clear,

Beautiful,

And comfortable.

How – blue.

”..........”

Can I say something selfish?

I love you.

2

Let me relate an old story.

Somewhere there was one, just one boy that was beyond saving. He was a boy that had a terribly twisted personality and relied on a brutally broken sense of valuation to let his trail of nonsense carry him through life.

Somewhere there was one, just one girl that was beyond saving. She was a girl that had a terribly honest personality and relied on a brutally correct sense of valuation to smile and innocently live.

Normally that would be the end of this story. The boy would live a short, slightly unfortunate and slightly tragic life, and the girl would live a short, slightly blessed and slightly elegant life. The world in which the boy lived and the world in which the girl lived were completely different places, after all.

However contrary to any reason, the boy met the girl, and the girl met the boy. It can genuinely be asked who and for what purpose caused this to happen. What sort of whim, what sort of consideration caused him and the girl to meet. It would be cruel to both the boy and the girl to chalk it up as mere coincidence or destiny or miracle.

Many humans died.

Many inhumans died.

The boy died a lot.

the girl also died a lot.

The boy killed a lot.

The girl did not kill anyone.

And then, unable to handle the burden of sin any longer, unable to carry the weight of punishment any longer, the boy escaped, alone.

Escape, alone, leaving the girl behind.

”– a stereotypical old tale…..”

Making it sound like a tragedy of myself the victim.

As if I were carrying on my back all the misfortune in the world. As if I personally owned all the unluck in the world.

The poor, pitiable victim.

Despite being the perpetrator. Despite being the perpetrator. Despite being the perpetrator.

Despite not being pitiable at all.

“People like me are everywhere…..”

And then just now, alone, I mumbled.

My left arm was wrapped superfluously in bandaging. It was probably not superfluous though, I thought. Kokoromi-sensei said this was still just an emergency measure. The fangs of the black dog had not reached the bone, but the jaws were quite powerful, and that the radial bone of my left arm was avulsion fractured or something. Of course, that was not all for my injuries, given that I had tumbled down the stairs so many times, so I had apparently been hurt all over. I say *apparently* like it is someone else’s business, but I honestly do not feel anything. My sense of pain had mostly recovered, but Kokoromi-sensei had shot me with painkillers, so my sense of pain had been numbed yet again.

“Even so normally ya’d be dyin’a pain ya know.”

Said sensei. A certified professor of dissection biology said that, so it must be true. In that case, it seems my body is weird after all. To the point that maybe it would be best for sensei to dissect me once.

In the fifth ward, on the rooftop of Neo-san's research ward, alone, I thought.

However, it is still nonsense. What is going to start now? You could call it a pre-established harmonic farce, and you could not. A farce would be why has taken place so far – the half-day that I had partook in as the main character was all a farce.

As such, because of that, when I realized everything – yes, truly everything – that farce ended. There is no need for a curtain call. There is no need for the curtain to even be lowered. Everything ended there.

Then what is the scene that is about to take place?

"This is, in other words, like an aftertaste….."

No, that is wrong.

This is more like a premonition. A premonition of something incredibly important about to begin. A rite of passage that cannot be avoided no matter what. If I thought of it that way, I felt like even this nonsensical scene held some meaning. Though I had no intention of complaining whether it had meaning or whether it did not.

So, here we go.

The one and only puppetshow by the user of nonsense.

First, the two meters from the fifth ward to the fourth ward. That you can jump this distance with ease had already been proven by me. I took a running start for show, then jumped across to the fourth ward. The impact of landing reverberated through my legs just a bit, but it was not enough impact to really mind. Apparently the painkillers were working well.

The fourth ward. Where Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san and I had been imprisoned. Well even so, I felt like I had done Suzunashi-san wrong. Of course it was a given that my eyes

would keep drifting to Kunagisa, but that person truly had nothing to do with any of this. There is a limit to how much one is allowed to drag other people into things, after all. Suzunashi-san is not as kind as Miiko-san, so I figured after all is said and done she would be lecturing me quite a bit. Oh well. I did not dislike being lectured. Especially if it came from Suzunashi-san.

And then from the fourth ward to the third ward, I jumped. This was three-and-a-half meters, so I had to be careful. On the flip side, it meant all you had to do was be careful.

The third ward. Miyoshi Kokoromi-sensei's territory. I do not know how she felt on her end, but truthfully, I did not wish to see sensei ever again. I did not dislike her. I think. I just did not want to see her. Really, never again. Yet still, despite that, if she were not in this facility. If I think that way, this reunion had some meaning to it after all.

And then from the third ward to the second ward. Not even two meters. Like the jump from the fifth ward to the fourth ward, this was a casual distance.

This second ward – Koutari-san's research ward. Koutari Hinayoshi-san. I remembered that person. And then that conversation I heard through the wireless device between him and the *immoral* Neo Furuara-san. *That the Utsurigi Gaisuke death was a suicide*."

"Well, if you call it a suicide there are few things more suicide than that suicide....."

I mumbled, but I did not think that to be the case. It may be, but it may also not be. It was all well either way. It was all bad either way. I think that is still in the end just a matter of recognition of the action.

From the second ward to the first ward, not three meters.

What I remembered then was Hime-chan. That *self-described* apprentice of mine who I asked to take care of the rest.

Hime-chan would probably know how I felt. That girl that had a trace of Kunagisa in her, yet inwardly was closer to me. By chance, we met last month, and recently she moved into the first floor of the apartment I lived in. She hired me to be her tutor, but there has not been much progress on that front. There is nothing more difficult than trying to teach someone who hates studying. However, that is what I need to be doing from now on. What I need to do to Professor Shadou Kyouichirou was something like that. I stood on the rooftop of the first ward dominated by Professor Kyouichirou and thought those thoughts.

I changed the direction I faced, and then one-and-a-half meters to the sixth ward. This was not even a casual distance.

Having crossed that much, I gazed across the rooftop of the seventh ward. I could see the silhouettes of several people. These are all audiences and simultaneously the dramatis personae of this puppet show. Put another way, I must use my nonsense to stomp these people into the ground. Is that even possible? When I wondered that, I thought of that denim-coated person. *If that person was not around* pointed specifically at her. While we ended up parting ways, it was all my fault. In that case, the least I could do to take responsibility is to pay her back the best I can, probably.

Incidentally, with regards to that person named *Ishimaru Kouta*, I decided to act like she never existed. Shito-kun and Misachi-san had sighted her, so I could not hide her existence in this facility, but if I were to admit a connection

to her, I would also be forced to admit Neo-san's background. I decided that would not be in our best interests, and because I fortunately had the lock-picking knife with me, I said that I had *escaped the cage on my own* and that I had *wandered around the rooftops of the facility*. Of course, this is quite a forced explanation, but an *intruder* was not good news to them either, so they were forced to swallow the ambiguity whole.

"This is the extremity of wanting ambiguity–" I said to myself self-deprecatingly. "– no, in this case, I am more wanting inconvenience."

From the sixth ward to the seventh ward, five meters. However, due to the shorter build of the seventh ward, it is more four-and-a-half meters.

Based on what Kunagisa said, the national average for long-jumping distance by high school boys is around that much. That made me feel a bit more relieved. Even if I had not done any proper exercise of late, I do not remember letting my body wither enough to lose to a seventeen-year-old boy. Maybe I simply lack the memory, but I have jumped this once. Even if I were self-absorbed at the time, there is no refuting that I had jumped the distance. Having succeeded once gave me a sense of comfort. I carefully gave myself a running start.

Running jumps are not simply a matter of using the leaping power of your legs, Kunagisa said. How well you can convert the momentum from the running start in midair into forward motion. Apparently it requires that sort of skill. Specifically, you need to reach top speed in the first half of the running start, and then you need to slowly shift your center of gravity to your upper body – or so Kunagisa had lectured me once on the techniques behind running

jumps, but that is not the sort of thing you understand with your head. That motion that experts perform while *simply jumping* is not something that a newbie like myself can copy. That was why I also *simply jumped*.

I ran – and then I stepped.

And then my body levitated.

I heard a roar. Someone has raised their voice. Someone else did not. I had enough composure to think of such absent-minded things. The time until landing felt like forever. People say that when human beings feel their life at risk, they see everything around them in slow motion, and I felt like I was experiencing exactly that. Or perhaps I had not jumped far enough, and was simply plummeting to the ground. I did not care which, but at the same time I think that would not be good.

And, fortunately, I landed on the rooftop of the seventh ward. Or more accurately, I failed my landing, and had an unsightly tumble. I landed on the ground with my hurt left arm first, and while I did not lose consciousness, I hit my head a little, and then ended up writhing. It was a very uncool arrival scene.

"Whatcha doin'," said Miyoshi Kokoromi-sensei with an exasperated voice as she walked to me. "Y'alright? And why're ya landing on the worse-off half anyways?"

"I am alright – more importantly."

I took sensei's hand and was pulled to my feet. I saw everyone else over her shoulder. Professor Shadou Kyouichirou. Secretary Uze Misachi. Assistant Oogaki Shito. Research fellow Neo Furuara. Research fellow Koutari Hinayoshi. Research fellow Kasugai Kasuga. And then after a bit of space, Suzunashi Neon-san. And then, Kunagisa Tomo. Nine in all, ten including myself, were gathered on

the rooftop of the seventh ward. Of course, I was the one that gathered everyone.

"– well, as you just saw," I stood up, and as I looked across at them I spread out my arms. I spread out my arms to prove that I was *safe*. "Like so, this seventh ward is accessible from every research ward by using the rooftops. Do you understand?"

"Hmph," said none other than Professor Kyouichirou with an agitated expression and speech mannerism, and of course he would. "How foolish. What a foolish story, greenhorn."

"Greenhorn. Harsh," I parried that without care. I have to deliberately cut off my emotional circuits now. "However unless you acknowledge reality, we cannot continue, Professor."

"Do you think such child's play – no, a trick that wouldn't even fool a child would affect me any? You can tell with one look. This seventh ward is shorter than the sixth ward. You've proven you can get here from there, but you can't prove the other way."

As expected of you, Professor. Unlike me, you notice that right away. It would have been simple if I could QED here, but of course that would not fly.

"Or do you plan to jump to the sixth ward?"

"No no….. that would be impossible. I think, anyways."

See? the Professor chuckled.

"What a waste of time. I'm quite the person to have taken the time for this."

Quite the person – indeed, that may be the case.

Even if it is simply because he is looking down on people, I cannot refute that being willing to tag along with this sort of thing makes Shadou Kyouichirou quite the person. To

allow me – an enemy, to act so freely makes him without a doubt quite the person. As for myself, I apologize to him in advance, but I will allow myself to take advantage of the opportunity.

"Well well, there is no need to rush to conclusions like that," I said. "Now – as the Professor says, you cannot return to the sixth ward from the seventh ward. Unless we are to assume that we have a world-class jumper among us. However, my actions just now have proven one thing. in short, *even if you cannot return, there is a route for infiltrating the seventh ward.*"

"So what?" the Professor butted in. "If you cannot leave after entering, such a route holds no meaning. Do I need to remind you that even from the inside you must clear a multitude of locks, and even if you can clear those locks, you would still leave a record in the logs? That the door was opened from the inside. But nothing of the sort remained."

"Probably. Well, as you said," I care-freely agreed. "The double-layered security consisting of the locks and the log. We shall let that be the case."

"What? You make it sound like there's more to it. Are you saying that I, this Shadou Kyouichirou tampered with the logs? That I deleted entries?"

"Of course not. And you said you cannot do that anyways, did you not? Even if Kunagisa can do it, you cannot. Is that not right? Even if Kunagisa can do it. You said it yourself, Professor."

It was a bit of a mean way of saying things, and the Professor glared at me with quite a look. However, it seemed closer to bewilderment over the cards I had not yet shown as opposed to anger over my choice of wording.

“You–”

“To begin with–,” I spoke over the Professor. ”– it is too early to say that one *cannot return*. After all, there is no rule saying that you must clear the gap with only your body. For example, if you can use a rope, you can create a road to the sixth ward.”

“You can. But that’s if you have rope that can support the weight of a person. So, where would you find that?”

“Well, you would not find one in this facility….. but the rope is just an example. For example you could tie the clothing you wear into a rope, or use the OA transmission device cables and cords to try to twist one together.”

“Do you think they would support human weight?”

“I do not,” I looked away from the Professor – and faced Koutari-san. “However, if I were to borrow the Professor’s favorite words–, as a candidate for rope that can support human weight – what do you think of hair?”

Everyone looked at Koutari-san at once. However, Koutari-san simply adjusted the position of his sunglasses and remained silent. He opted to remain silent. I felt slightly exasperated at his stonewalled expression and continued.

“Koutari-san’s hair used to be extremely long. If you put them together, perhaps it could create a bridge to the sixth ward – what do you think? Suzunashi-san?”

”….. hmm?” Suzunashi-san looked a bit startled. “My, you swung that to me? Well, right….. human hair is pretty sturdy. Although that depends on the person, too, but for example, I’ve seen Asano use that samurai ponytail to strangle someone.”

“Yes. That is not a situation I would want to barge in on….. but if memory serves correct, one woman was said to

have tested how much her long hair could carry, and it ended up being able to support over one ton," this was something I heard from Kunagisa. "That is an extreme example though and may not be the norm, but using hair is a plausible scenario. Or,"

This time I turned to Kasugai-san. Everyone followed suit.

Instead of a human, if you were to use an animal, it might be possible to leap this distance. Well, like so….." I raised my wrapped left arm for everyone to see. "It cannot be said impossible for that giant dog I fought to the death with earlier to be able to leap across this distance. What do you think, Kasugai-san?"

"Who knows. I've never tried it but it probably can," Kasugai-san tilted her head to the side but gave me an affirmative answer. "If that were the case from your perspective would that make me the suspect?"

"No, I have not said that much. All I am saying is that this seventh ward was not a sealed room at all, and that it was not completely closed off. I was just giving specific examples. Then what happens? At the very least, there is no longer a reason to suspect Kunagisa herself – or rather just the three of us–"

"An old trick," as expected, the Professor did not bat an eye at this so far. And with a chortling tone, he stared at me. "**Cobbling together** extreme and memorable theories and using the impact to try to make it sound like the truth has been revealed. The stunt to run and jump to this seventh ward was for this, wasn't it? A pretty typical scam artist's method. I'm not biting, greenhorn."

"Cobbled together?"

"Yeah. It's obviously if you think about it. Both of those

examples can be broken with just a bit of thought. Koutari's hair was long but it was still only a meter at best. If you were to wind that together into a rope, factoring durability, it would go four meters at best. Not enough to go from the seventh ward to the sixth ward. And the animal suspect theory is a joke. How does a mere dog stab a person, crucify them to the wall, and write letters in blood?"

"Who knows – maybe someone was riding on the back of the dog?"

"I think that would be taking it too far," Kasugai-san interceded on my joke. She might surprisingly be a good person, after all. "Impossible to jump that while carrying a person."

"….. well, thank you," I bowed my head. "I am grateful for the information."

"So? What? Greenhorn. Are those the cards you brought?"

"So then – how about this, for example? Let us think about the reason for Utsurigi Gaisuke having been dismembered that way. Why was Utsurigi's stomach cut open? What if it was a means for **pulling out his internal organs**?"

I asked, while I motioned extravagantly like an actor on a stage. I felt like I was acting too much, like Neo-san, but there is no such thing as too much in a case like this.

"Pulling out the internal organs–" sensei asked, mystified. "Whatcha mean?"

"They say the human digestive tract is like one long tube. One tube connecting the mouth to the waste output. And this tube made from meat has a good amount of elasticity, and as a result a certain level of strength. For example **to use that as a rope**–"

"Huh? Wait," sensei stopped me. "Utsurigi-san's internal organs were all right inside. I dissected his intestine an' liver an' all."

"Exactly. As such, this, too, was just a theory," I raised my palms. "Truth be the told, it is probably impossible to use the digestive tract as a rope….. that was a pretty crude type of joke. You know, lip service. But still, I do not think it a bad idea to assume that there was some sort of deliberateness to Utsurigi-san's body itself. I do not intend at all for a greenhorn like myself to host a mystery-solving conference right here and now….. but do you not think there is something to the rather absurd method of Utsurigi Gaisuke's death?"

"What're you getting at," the Professor said, irritated. "The way you talk is roundabout. Too roundabout. What're you trying to say, if you have something to say, just spit it out, like a man."

"Like a man. Well, I do not mind….." I shrugged my shoulders. Roundabout. However, that could not be helped, because there was something I needed to skirt around. "However, if you think about it, the Professor's theories were not particularly manly, either. *Kunagisa Tomo should have been able to do it*….. that was pretty forced. And, even if it were possible for Kunagisa, in the end – that does not in any way mean that any of you could not have done it also. You just needed to say *I cannot do it.*"

"….. is that your solution?"

"No, this was just faultfinding. There is no deep meaning to it. At this point."

The Professor looked at this half-assed conversation involving the giving and withdrawing of theories with a disapproving look, but this time he remained silent. In the

end, that was what I was hoping for. At the end of the end of the end, I wanted to create a smoke screen. After creating a mirage to the best of abilities, to create anxiety in the Professor – and everyone else. To fluster them. In other words, to rattle their thinking. In other words, to avoid standing on the same ground as them.

This is the exact opposite methodology of *Mankind's Strongest Contractor*, but for the weakest like myself, this is probably the only strategy capable of overcoming *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou.

"Sensei," I turned to Kokoromi-sensei and asked. "In any case, could you tell us the results of the autopsy on Utsurigi-san?"

"Mm? Ahh. Umm. Time a death was roughly 1AM. Cause a death'd be the scissors piercin' his eye and reachin' the brain. The stomach and all that other stuff came after. Arms cut off even later, and crucified after that. Well, that'd be the gist of it."

I had heard this already in the third ward, but that reality needed to be kept under wraps. Sensei of course understood that, and naturally reported, including everyone else. Despite it not really being the case, I felt like we had become accomplices. Although this was still probably not a case of trust.

"What bothers me, y'know, would be that time lag before cuttin' off the arms. Like three or four hours after he died. Can't imagine it'd take that long, so–"

"Hey, you're talking too much, Miyoshi," the Professor said, as if scolding sensei. "I don't care if you're an old acquaintance of his, I won't allow you to back that any more than necessary."

"Backing him eh," Kokoromi-sensei sarcastically laughed

at the Professor. “Roger dodger. I’ll hold off on doin’ anythin’ much. So, whatcha meanin’ to do with Utsurigi-san’s autopsy, my student?”

“**Whatcha meanin’ to do**? However, sensei, would it not take a lot of stamina to destroy a human body to that degree, and then crucify them?”

“Are you trying to say that the Lady of Kunagisa cannot do so with her thin arms?” it was Professor Kyouichirou who answered, perhaps in an effort to prevent sensei from speaking any more. “Hah. I’d prefer if you stopped trying to find fault with everything. The Lady of Kunagisa doesn’t need to be the one who did everything. After all, the Lady of Kunagisa simply needs to open the door. The rest – **you** could do.”

“As you say. I have not a word of retort,” I did not respond to the Professor’s taunt. That time – this morning, that I became enraged at the Professor’s taunt was my big failing. I will not step on the same landmine twice. If possible, anyways. “However, in that case, the question still remains unanswered as to why Utsurigi Gaisuke’s body needed to be dismembered to such an extent.”

“Are you saying you have the answer to that?”

“I shall answer that at a later time. Now, there is no point in taking up too much time and it will simply become a drag, so allow me to bring us into the solution arc. Truthfully – unfortunately and helplessly truthfully, not only with regards to this seventh ward, but every building in this facility has so few points of entry that they can each be called indomitable fortresses. No windows – while this cannot be helped, there is only one entrance. And that one entrance has the Kunagisa Tomo-made security lock. Well, not bothering with the lock itself, that means the only

openings are this rooftop and the entrance. Forgive me if I call it a skyward tunnel. Professor Kyouichirou determined that the suspect who killed Utsurigi-san entered and left through that entrance," I glanced at Professor Kyouichirou. That would indeed imply that the suspects are Kunagisa Tomo and her acquaintances. However, as one of them, I cannot accept that theory. The Professor may simply call it *a prepared agreement among accomplices* but I can vouch for Kunagisa's innocence. Or rather, I know of Kunagisa Tomo's innocence. As a result, I would say the entrance was not used."

"So ya'd say the rooftop route's th'only option?"

"Miyoshi!" the Professor shouted. "Cut that out! You've been acting out of line!"

"Well m'bad. Guess ya didn't call."

Sensei bowed her head. As someone who already decided to cut ties with the Professor, it probably suits her better for my little puppet show to succeed. In that sense, perhaps sensei and I could truly be called accomplices. I think.

"Well, that is what I am saying. However – this has quite a few restrictions," I turned toward the sixth ward from whence I came, and said, mumbling. "Do you know what the restriction is on this rooftop route?"

This question that I posed to no one in particular received no response. And after a while, the Professor said irritably, "We've already established that it's a one-way street."

"You can get here but you can't go bac–"

"No, well, that is true. Indeed, you cannot go back – but if you think about it, *coming* is pretty difficult, too."

"– what?"

From the fifth ward to the first ward, and from there to

the sixth ward, well, the longest distance was about three-and-a-half meters, so anyone here would be able to make that jump – but not *anyone* would be able to make this last jump–"

Five meters – which really ends up being more like four-and-a-half meters. Rivaling the national average of high school boys– however, it being the average means that there is some scatter. It absolutely does not mean that it is the minimal line that everyone can overcome. In fact, it actually means that around half actually cannot clear this jump.

In other words, **there are those that can clear and those that cannot clear** these four-and-a-half meters–

"As you can see, I was able to jump. Despite how I may look, a long time ago – or rather, well, I shall spill the beans because everyone already knows, but five years ago I participated as an abroad student in the ER program male youth development engine under the ER3 System research group. I trained my body a bit while I was there, and as a result – I have above-average athleticism even now."

Although I am gradually losing it all, I added as a joke.

"Umm. Sorry, Suzunashi-san," I asked Suzunashi-san again. "Do you think you could jump this distance?"

"I probably can," this time she may have expected the question, as Suzunashi-san immediately answered. "I've never really measured it, but five meters should be a cinch. Maybe six meters – might be impossible. Something like that."

"Is that so."

Even for someone unfamiliar with long-jumping, Suzunashi-san's extraordinary height, leg length, and her strength meant that her answer did not surprise anyone.

Most probably figured she could jump further than me. I nodded lightly, and then turned to Kunagisa.

"Tomo, you?"

"Uuuh. Impossible," Kunagisa pursed her lips and answered unhappily. Not that there was any point in asking her. "I might not make one meter."

This, too, was expected. Kunagisa is a small girl who skips meals, eats unhealthy, and coops up, so she is as distant as can be from muscles and leg strength. I turned to the Professor and said, "as you heard."

"Even among the three of us, there is a bit of scatter. That said, if we assume the *rooftop route* was taken, then our innocence is proven. After all, you cannot use this route without **starting from one of the research wards**. As long as every building has been securely locked, we cannot enter the premises."

"Are you saying the suspect is one of us?"

The Professor glared at me.

"That is what I have been saying, is it not?"

I answered solemnly.

"Who? Give me the name."

"I am getting there. Oh please, why the hurry? This is **the end**, so let us enjoy the ride. – now, who cannot use this rooftop route? Professor Shadou Kyouichirou, secretary Uze Misachi, assistant Oogaki Shito, Miyoshi Kokoromi-sensei, research fellow Neo Furuara, research fellow Koutari Hinayoshi, research fellow Kasugai Kasuga–" I said one name at a time, as if interrogating them. This was the start of the climax. "– first, we can remove the three women. In other words, sensei, Kasugai-san, and Misachi-san."

"—-" "....." "........."

The three of them responded with silence.

“This is a simple matter of build….. all three are rather small. And, I am not wishing to discriminate based on gender, but there is also the problem of fundamental athletic capabilities. It is much too risky too attempt this acrobatic feat as a woman.”

I feel like I could sense Suzunashi-san’s glare from my right, but I chose to ignore it. You cannot call yourself wise by being afraid of what will happen in the future. I think, but I am definitely being glared at. Hang in there, this is a serious situation. I shook my head slightly, and then said, “To continue.”

“I think it is impossible for Neo-san, too. From a physical build perspective.” Umm. How should I put it. In other words. “Because he has a more rotund shape than is the norm…..”

“Well, probably,” Neo-san slapped his belly while roaring with laughter. “I’d be trying to jump that while carrying an extra 20 kilograms. I probably wouldn’t make it. That strikes me off the list of suspects I suppose.”

”….. that leaves three. Professor Shadou Kyouichirou, assistant Oogaki Shito, research fellow Koutari Hinayoshi. ….. of these, the one we can remove would be of course yourself, Professor.”

”….. why?”

“Well, if you want to say you can clear the jump, I do not mind, but the Professor is quite senior. Sixty-three….. I do think this would be quite tough.”

The Professor said nothing. But there was no need to wait for an answer. based on common sense, anyone could tell that it would be impossible for the Professor to jump that distance.

“And so that leaves two.”

Koutari-san, and Shito-kun.

Everyone looked at the two.

“These two are able to use the rooftop route – in other words, in Shito-kun’s case, from the first ward to the sixth ward and then to the seventh ward. In Koutari-san’s case the second ward, first ward, sixth ward, and then the seventh ward, in that order–”

I observed the two as I spoke, but as before, Koutari-san seemed to show no signs of reaction, instead fixating on the position of his sunglasses. Calmness was his attitude. However, that was not the case with Shito-kun. His face was flushed red with anger, and he shouted at me.

”– hey! You! I shut up and listen and all I get is this ridiculou-”

“I am sorry but this is not the time for me to be dealing with your little jabs. Will you just stay quiet and listen?”

“The fuck? You–”

“Calm down. **You too** cannot use this route, after all,” I raised one hand to stop the enraged Shito-kun, and continued speaking in a solemn tone. “You have a **vision** problem.”

”– wha,” Shito-kun froze at the word *vision*. ”-t did you just say?”

“I said vision… you cannot see well, can you? With those eyes,” I said deliberately, as if that were an obvious, known fact. “It does not appear to be an issue with the lenses of your eyeball nor your glasses….. so it might be a problem with your nervous system? I am not sure because I was not very good with anatomy.”

Everyone suddenly piped up. Those that knew began speaking to me, and those that did not began questioning

Shito-kun, and everyone glanced about. In terms of insiders, Misachi-san and Kasugai-san did not seem to know. For the outsiders, Suzunashi-san seemed not to have noticed, while Kunagisa seemed to have noticed. Well, with Kunagisa's observation skills it was not out of the question.

"You….. how did you–"

"Just a hunch, that is all."

For example, when we first met, he had to come ridiculously close to confirm me, or that he had to confirm Kunagisa by touching her hands, or that he could not tell whether the tall Suzunashi-san was a man or woman. Or for example when Kouta-san and I were hiding behind the water supply tank, a person with normal vision would not have been able to find us out, especially considering that he was again unable to determine the gender of the tall Kouta-san. And then the reason that Kouta-san continually aimed not for his head but his stomach. All of that together gave me a *hunch*.

"Am I wrong?"

"– you're not, but….."

The loss of vision due to an abnormal nervous system. Whether that was priori or posteriori I could not tell, but regardless of which, or perhaps a result of the Professor's *human experiments*, mattered not to me. Irrelevant. In other words, Shito-kun could only see landscape and people in **cloudy** fashion. While his ability to walk about the facility without any problems meant that he was not completely blind, that still meant…..

"Then we can say that it is impossible for you to jump this distance."

"H- hey. You're right about me….. but that means," Shito-kun suppressed his anger, but this time said with a

flustered tone. “That means there’s only one–”

“Exactly. There is one. Koutari-san,” I pointed at Koutari-san. ”– in Koutari-san’s case – well, how about his case? The problems of gender, build, age, senses, or perhaps a like reason–”

Koutari-san. Did not. React. Did not glare. Did not react. Did not even change how he breathed.

”– there are **none**.”

I was not the one who abruptly said that.

It was Koutari-san himself.

“Indeed, there are no reasons for me.”

”– Koutari!” the Professor shouted. “What’re you saying! You–”

“Calm down,” Koutari-san said curtly, with a solemn tone that matcedh mine. “Professor. It is simply a discussion of whether I can cross this. At this point. Isn’t that right, Mr. Lover?”

Mr. Lover. I trembled, at that nickname, which was far too sharp to be used so calmly in this situation. In other words. Kunagisa Tomo’s.

Koutari-san and I stood roughly five meters apart, physically – no, more like six meters. Perhaps I should be just a bit closer. I thought, as I took just one step toward Koutari-san. And then I faced him.

From here – my opponent is Koutari Hinayoshi.

From here, my opponent is Koutari Hinayoshi.

“Or are you saying that I’m the suspect, Mr. Lover?”

He said, like a suspect.

“Yes. You are the suspect, Koutari-san.”

I answered, like a detective.

I could hear the Professor shouting, but I ignored it. I took on emore step toward Koutari-san. There would be no

point in getting any closer. The physical distance between us was about four-and-a-half meters – around this should be perfect.

”– interesting. If you’re saying I’m the suspect, then very well, prove it, Mr. Lover,” Koutari-san said without changing his expression. “Indeed, I’m the only one who can use this route. After all, my name is *God’s Legs* 1). However, as the Professor has stated, and as you have agreed, there is no way of returning.”

“No way of returning–” I repeated his words. ”– but that assumes there is a need to return.”

”.........”

Koutari-san did not respond.

”..... no, there is a need to return, of course. Otherwise the log kept in the central computer would no longer match. Theoretically, you cannot use the means of remaining here after killing Utsurigi-san, and then waiting for Shito-kun’s arrival and leaving through the entrance. The doors autolock, so you must leave immediately after it has opened, and in that case it would be difficult to leave without Shito-kun noticing. Even if you remain out of his sight, Shito-kun would notice,” like when he discovered Kouta-san and I. “Theoretically, even if you could fortunately escape from the seventh ward, this time you cannot enter the second ward. You could, but then it would show up in the log.”

“I’m tired of your pointless theories,” the Professor said this time not out of anger but out of true exhaustion. “Cut it out. We don’t have time to be dealing with your nonsense anymo–”

“Unfortunately, just as you are the *Mad Demon*, I am the user of nonsense. However, do not worry, we are almost at

the end. The final stop is right ahead," I said only that much to the Professor, and then turned to face Koutari-san again. "Now, we shall backtrack a bit – but why did you need to destroy Utsurigi Gaisuke's body so much? Hatred? Wanting to dominate? A ritual? Well, it does not matter. However, there is just one thing that sticks out – why did the suspect take Utsurigi Gaisuke's arms?"

Koutari-san did not answer, unemotional.

"Perhaps they wanted the *arms* of a once and former cyber-terrorist – literally, the *arms*. However this romantic thought is a bit of a forced issue….. the first thing I thought of was to eradicate evidence that could have emerged through a cadaveric spasm. A cadaveric spasm–" I shot sensei a glance. "– a phenomenon that occurs when a life form is violently and abruptly killed. When the victim grabs something before being killed, their hands freeze in position. In other words, if the victim grabbed the button of the suspect or their nametag, it would become undeniable proof, and so the suspect would need to get rid of it."

"So there was absolute proof in Utsurigi-san's hands?" Suzunashi-san asked me. "But then you would just need to cut the hands off from the wrists. You could cut off the fingers too and make the item drop out. You know, Inoji, I've just about had enough, too, so can you make it easier to get?"

"Sorry," I apologized to Suzunashi-san. How unsightly. "Umm. Well, why they did not cut off the wrists or slice off the fingers was because if you did that, it would be obviously that it was an act to *remove evidence grabbed through a cadaveric spasm*. If you cut the arms off at the shoulder it would cover that up–… or at least be able to muddle the picture– or so I once thought, but."

"But?"

"If you think about it….. Utsurigi-san's cause of death was being stabbed in the eye with a scissors, Suzunashi-san. That means none of this would make sense."

"Why? It's a plenty violent death, I think."

"I thought so, too, and that's true, but….. in terms of problems, like, if someone is **driving the blades of a scissors toward your eye from in front**," I made a scissors with my fingers and pointed to my eyes. "In the face of such danger, no human would try to grab the button of a shirt or a nametag on the lab coat or something like that….."

"Ahh… well of course," Suzunashi-san nodded. You would first grip **the opponent's arms**, to protect yourself. Hmm….. well now that you put it that way, that's true, but then why would the arms have cut off?"

"That is not the only problem. As sensei said earlier, why the arms were cut off some hours after death. Well, the answer to this one can be figured out quickly. This is simply because they were **waiting for it to stop raining**."

"– rain?"

"Rain. This rooftop route is already difficult to return through, yet it was raining heavily last night," Kouta-san said the arms had been cut off some hours after death, and so it was raining, but that means the reverse could also be implied. Basically, **because it was raining**, the arms were cut off a few hours later. "In truth, it had stopped raining by sunrise, but – yes, truth be told, you should not have executed that murder when it was going to rain that night. Am I wrong, Koutari-san?"

"Who knows," Koutari-san answered with a low tone. "I don't know what you mean."

”– however, there was a reason you had to execute it then. Because you did not know **when** the three of us intended to leave. If you had let last night’s opportunity go and we had gone home today – you would lose the scapegoats **for framing the murder**.”

”………”

“Fortunately, it stopped raining. So all you had to do was go back.”

“That’s why! We’ve been asking how he can return!”

Finally, the Professor lost control of himself and threw his cane at me. It seems he had reached his irritability limit. The wooden cane struck my left arm, right above the bandage. It did not hurt because of the pain killer, but I could still feel the impact, and I took two, three steps back. Maybe that really broke my bone.

As Suzunashi-san had done this morning, I simply glared at the Professor in silence.

”– what. Why’re you looking at me. With those – with those– eyes,” I did not throw anything but, however, the Professor took a few steps back. And then he ran into Misachi-san, and stopped. “Those eyes, like his, a brat like you, at me.”

Him? Who? Not Suzunashi-san. Perhaps Utsurigi. Or perhaps the young Kunagisa Tomo or Nao-san. I did not know. I did not care to know. Well, whoever.

”– when you look from over there,” I spoke. “It is actually hard to notice. That it is a one-way route, because you can come here but that you cannot go back. For example, if Koutari-san – no, let us keep it undecided, if the suspect jumped across and for the first time realized they could not return. Then how can they return? Simple. They just need to use rope.”

”….. I said! There is nothing of the–”

“I said earlier, did I not? That Koutari-san can use his long hair as rope.”

“And I said earlier, too! There is not enough leng–”

“**If there is not enough, then add to it**. For example–

– using Utsurigi Gaisuke’s arms.”

No one had the gall to intercede this time. Presumably no one had expected those words – no. Just one person, one human being had expected those words. I faced that person.

I faced Koutari Hinayoshi.

“On the ends of the rope of hair you created, you tied the right arm and the left arm. I do not know the average length of an adult male arm – but for example, if you were to use my arms, you would get sixty to seventy centimeters. With both arms, you would get about – a meter thirty. If you add hair to that, you can reach the sixth ward. Human limbs – can obviously support human weight. Is that not right, Koutari-san?” Koutari-san did not answer, and simply adjusted his sunglasses. I continued. “Rope – or perhaps something of the sort. There is however a problem to using such a thing – in other words, how you hook the rope to the rooftop of the sixth ward considering there is no fencing. However, if you attach Utsurigi’s arm to the end of

the rope – you can clear that hurdle. **The shape of Utsurigi's hands having grabbed your arms under cadaveric spasm** would look just like a fishing hook. It is perfect for attaching to the drainage at the edge of the roof–"

"– enough nonsense!"

The Professor. *Mad Demon* Professor Shadou Kyouichirou stomped his feet and shouted so loud that he began panting afterwards. Misachi-san tried to hold him back, but he tossed her aside. "Do you think that unrealistic – incoherent – cobbled together – far-fetched thing will fly!?"

"Unrealistic? Incoherent? Cobbled together? Far-fetched? Of course!" I looked at the Professor and shouted back. "However, Professor, considering this is a case that involves none other than yourself Shadou Kyouichirou, Utsurigi Gaisuke, and Kunagisa Tomo, how could you expect the solution to be anything but unrealistic and incoherent and cobbled together and far-fetched, and insane and reasonable? This is the one truth within this facility!"

"How idiotic… you scum! Do you think that's possible!?"

"The problem is not whether **it happened or not**. The problem is also not whether **it did not happen**. The action is not the problem. The problem is whether there is recognition! Am I wrong! Koutari-san!"

"Sh- shut up!" the Professor's face contorted with anger. It became red, and then bluish-white. "Ko….. Koutari! Say something! To this messed up brat–"

"………"

Koutari-san did not respond to even those words from the Professor. And then, raising his chin just a bit, he said to me.

"….. proof? That I did such a thing."

“Proof….. well, you cutting your hair would not suffice as proof, but–” I pointed at Koutari-san. “If I am largely correct, then on one of your arms there should be a hand-print left by Utsurigi-san due to his cadaveric spasm.”

”………”

“Koutari!”

The Professor shouted again.

“Tell him he’s wrong! Roll up your sleeves and show him you’re innocent! And then we’ll never let this brat out of the cage again! We’ll lock him up in the basement of the basement, and then thoroughly, thoroughly, thoroughly–”

”– well, I’ll give you a sixty.”

Koutari-san switched from his low tone and spoke with a much lighter tone.

“Kouta–”

“Sixty. I underestimated you. It was too clumsily done, and it took you far too much time.”

”– why, thank you,” I shrugged. ”– even so, that is a passing grade.”

I said with a hushed voice.

And then Koutari-san laughed.

It was a laugh filled with composure, a laugh that revealed his complete lack of care.

As if he were laughing at my antics.

Antics.

In the end, that was all it was. From start to finish, I had been dancing on the palm of this man. From start to finish – truly, from start to finish. From the absolute beginning, to this pre-established harmonic end. To the end of the end of the end.

“W– why!” Shito-kun was the one who shouted. “Why, why would you – what reason would you have for killing Utsurigi-san–”

“Reason? I see. A reason.”

Koutari-san put his arms under his white lab coat while looking like he was thinking. And then.

“However, don’t you think there’s no need for a reason?”

”– what are you saying–” Shito-kun’s ovice trembled. “Killing someone with a reason – killing someone without a motive.....”

That.

Is that something that cannot be?

A murder without reason.

A murder without conviction.

Of course it cannot be.

If so.

“Then can you kill someone if you have a reason?”

”..... Koutari-san.”

“Just kidding.”

Koutari-san cackled. It was a cold laugh.

As if he were looking at a clueless child.

A sympathizing supremacy.

A mourning disdain.

That was how Koutari-san seemed as he looked at Shito-kun.

“Of course, I’m kidding.”

The arms under his white lab coat seemed to have grabbed something.

“You know. Because you can’t call this a murder case without motive–!”

And then he swiftly pulled out his arms – and threw the knives held between his fingers. All three of the three knives he flung stabbed my left arm through the bandages. I flew back from the impact and fell. I fell down back first. Air was knocked out of my lungs and I momentarily struggled to breath. And then a moment later, my head hit the ground.

For just one moment, everyone looked at me as I lay fallen. And it took another moment for them to look back at Koutari-san.

Combined, two moments.

That was enough.

Bam, the sound of the door being shut.

By the time everyone had turned back, the sight nor shadow nor shape of Koutari Hinayoshi could no longer be found.

Suddenly, he disappeared.

As if.

As if such a character had never existed from the start.

”– that bastard! What the fuck! Shit! Shit!” Shito-kun ran toward the door after Koutari-san. ”– Not getting away!”

“Give it up, Shito-kun,” I said while still sprawled on my back, and with a lackadaisical tone even by my standards, spoke to Shito-kun. “Chasing him would be a waste of effort.”

”– ah?” Shito-kun turned around with furrowed brows. “What do you mean–”

“Exactly what I said. You cannot catch Koutari-san now.”

Yes. Probably cannot catch him. After all, you could figure as much given that he showed up to this solution arc full of confidence. He had already gotten ahold of some sort of escape route – and an absolutely guaranteed escape route, at that. One that would let him escape from us, and the police. Although I did not know what that means was, exactly.

That was fine.

I did not think of wanting to catch him, anyways. What was important was that Kunagisa Tomo's innocence was proven. And that I had carried that out. Then that was enough. Other people would take care of the left. None of that was our business.

"And – Shito-kun. I think you have other business to take care of."

I sat up, and then pulled out the knives stuck through the bandages one at a time. Given the lack of bleeding I was not particularly hurt. It was probably only enough to pierce one layer of skin. The bandages had acted as a defensive wall. And just a single layer of skin being breached was not enough, thanks to the painkillers, to make me feel any pain, although now I was truly afraid of when the painkillers cut out. Would my left arm ever be usable again?

However – these three knives. If I did not protect myself with my arm, they would have struck my heart. Did he figure I would protect myself? Or did he figure it would be alright to kill me? It was not even worth thinking about, because it was almost certainly the latter.

He has a reason for wanting to kill me.

And I have a reason for being killed by him.

I finished pulling out the knives, and then with my left arm.

– pointed at Professor Shadou Kyouichirou.

“Shito-kun. Your job is to be his assistant, is it not?” I tried to be careful of sounding too cold, but I still ended up speaking with a stoic voice. “You have to fulfill that to the end.”

”– Professor.”

Shito-kun said with an exasperated tone.

There, dumbfounded. Dumbfounded, and slumped on the ground, was one old man. Facing the door that Koutari-san had run through, with his eyes open and unblinking, jaw agape.

Like he would topple over with a push.

Like he would crumble apart with a poke.

Just the silhouette of one small old man.

An old professor that lost Utsurigi Gaisuke, and could not get ahold of Kunagisa Tomo.

That lost his one goal.

That lost his irreplaceable hope.

So this is what happens to a human being that has lost everything.

Mad Demon.

This was truly, in the truest meaning.

“Genuinely, un-inflated nonsense.”

I sighed, facing up.

I see – this was truly malignant bacteria. Expands and expands, and you cannot hope to contain it. If this was the result because Professor Kyouichirou had tried to capture *Cluster*’s cracker Utsurigi Gaisuke, because he had tried to corral him in his hands – if Utsurigi Gaisuke was such that he could not be corralled by a genius such as Shadou Kyouichirou – then what exactly could be corralled in the hand of such a dwarf as I?

"Ii-chan."

Something grabbed my right hand.

It was Kunagisa.

The blue-colored.

Girl that I know very well.

"So, since you're done and everything's over, can we go home?"

Done. Over.

What exactly is done and which was over that she was referring to?

I do not know.

I do not know.

What I know is just one thing.

This, Kunagisa Tomo.

"Uni? What's up, Ii-chan? You don't wanna go home?"

I could see Suzunashi-san past Kunagisa. She was about to light a cigarette. Our eyes met for just a moment, but she disregarded that, and simply looked up at the sky.

"..... right."

Right.

Over, and done with.

There is nothing I need to do after this.

There is nothing I need to do after that.

There is nothing I need to do after the fact.

Now, simply, I can freely flow along.

So.

So, lets go home.

"Lets go home, Tomo."

However.

Where exactly am I trying to go home to?

---

1) 神 god 足 leg

哀川潤
AIKAWA JYUN
請負人。
後日談——負け犬達の沈黙
ぼく（語り部）
十九歳。

Afterwards
Silence of the Losers

Utsurigi Gaisuke, *Criminal Judge* Green Green Green (Malignant Bacteria).
Hinemosu Suzu, *Consigned Stillness* Double Flick (Double-layered World).
Gotodoroki Seigo, *Scornful Compatriot* Reverse Cross (Night-travel Crime).
Munefuyumu Tsuki, *Clamoring Bloodshot Eyes* Cubic Loop (Infinite Three-dimension).
Nadekiri Hakuraku, *Disheartened Parting Gift* Dancing with Madness (Dancing Wildly).
Ayanami Hyou, *Spinning Suzuki* Cheetah (Wild Beast).
Shikigishi Kishiki, *Squirming Ruination* Bad Kind (City).
Shigai Touno, *Resurrecting Debasement* Trigger-happy End (Corpse).
Kunagisa Tomo, *Walking Wrath* Dead Blue (Blue Verge of Death).

Not so much an epilogue so much as the behind-the-scenes that must never be spoken about.

As for where I return, for now the only place for me to return to is that apartment in Kyoto. That night – after having wrapped everything up, without waiting for nightfall, we left the Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility using the Fiat we refueled with Shito-kun's help. Suzunashi-san reserved a hotel while in the car, and we spent the night in Nagoya. While it was an inn we settled on at the last minute, it boasted an enormous room and top-notch service – well, not that much, but it was still much better than the *Haunted House* in the research facility. The three of us slept like corpses in the same bed (Me → Kunagisa → Suzunashi-san). Well, we did not really, but it definitely felt like it had been a while since I had slept.

When the sun rose, Suzunashi-san's lecturing began. It lasted several hours, and I sat in seiza[1)] posture the entire time in silence without being allowed to talk back, sometimes having my head bopped while she vented her anger. While that happened, Kunagisa woke up, and we spent the entire day touring Nagoya. While keeping watch over Kunagisa, who ran around like a child, I bought the uirō Hime-chan had requested of me (conveniently, there was a five-color set, immediate buy) as well as some for Miiko-san and the others in the apartment, for a total of ten bars.

On the way home that evening, we dropped off Suzunashi-san in the Hiei mountain range in Higa Prefecture.

"Well, give Asano my regards. We'll continue the lecture another day."

So she said. Apparently she was still not through. Part of me felt exasperated, but the other part of me looked forward to it.

And then I stopped the car in the high-end residential area Shirosaki that Kyoto boasted to the rest of country (or perhaps more accurately *felt embarrassed about*), or more specifically in front of the most flamboyant mansion in town that Kunagisa lived in, and helped her to her room.

"Well, later." "Yup, later."

I did not know what she meant by *later* but I returned her greeting, returned to the Fiat, and then this time headed for the apartment in which I live. I parked the Fiat in the parking lot, and then less than a minute of walking. I entered the apartment, and before heading to my room, knocked on the door to the room next door.

"Yo, welcome home," Miiko-san was fortunately home, and with she welcomed me with her usual, unkempt sight. It seemed she had downed a little, no, quite a bit of sake, and her face was red. "That was fast. Two days three nights."

"Two days three nights….."

Indeed. The three of us had only been in that facility for two days. Yet look at us, it felt like we had been imprisoned for a whole month.

"Well, yes. Thank you for letting me borrow your car. Here is the key. And money for gasoline….. also, a souvenir, uirō."

"Right… hmm?" Miiko-san noticed my left arm. It had been re-patched by Kokoromi-sensei, and was now covered in a cast instead of just bandages. "….. Inoji, did you drive from Nagoya to here with that arm?"

"Huh. Well, yes, see, my fingers move. And I use my right hand for the transmission."

"I see….. well, that's alright then."

Miiko-san stopped asking questions then, and did not ask

about what happened to my arm.

“Come in. Let’s eat uirō. These things taste better eating together with you.”

“Usually you’re supposed to decline, but.....”

But, even I struggled to turn down this nostalgic sense of human decency.

“I shall accept today, Miiko-san.”

“Mmhmm. C’mon c’mon, get closer.”

And so in that way I ate uirō and drank tea in Miiko-san’s room – and while it was quite a hassle to deal with a drunk Miiko-san – I then returned to my room. There was nothing in it.

”..... huh?”

Wait, wait, while it was normal for there to be no furniture, my clothing and my books being nonexistent was not. I did not see my cell phone nor its charger, either. Woah, even my health insurance card and my accounting book are gone. For a moment I was in a bit of a rush thinking I had been robbed, but the next moment I realized what had happened, and headed to Hime-chan’s room on the first floor.

“Because you said you’d give me everything, Master.”

The suspect was Hime-chan.

“Hime-chan cleaned your room. Even threw away your trash.”

There was no doubting that the *trash* Hime-chan referred to included my living items.

”..... Hime-chan. That was supposed to be if I did not return safely.....”

“But. But but, looking at your arm, Master, you didn’t get back safely.”

”..... maybe.”

Jeez….. if every case could be solved so easily.

I took back my accounting book and health insurance card from Hime-chan, gave her the uirō in exchange, and then returned to my room once more.

"Ahh….. you know."

As if I had awakened from nihility. As if I had awakened from a nightmare. That is, of course, nothing but misapprehension similar to a delusion. Because the *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility was indeed real.

"Real – how is that any different from an illusion?"

What will happen to that research facility now? I thought about that at length. With its leader Professor Shadou Kyouichirou in such a state, it probably does not function as a research facility anymore, so it may have already been absorbed into another research syndicate, is what Kunagisa had told me. Indeed, it no longer held any meaning – literally – and I could not imagine the Kunagisa household pouring money into the *Mad Demon* forever. So then what would happen to the other researchers.

Neo-san would not be troubled. He was a turncoat from the start. His profession is betrayal – an immoral who lived on the extreme in terms of not belonging anywhere. He would just return payment equating to the aspects of his job he was unable to fulfill, and as a professional traitor, move on to his next *job*.

"– but you know. I want to try working as a pair with you once. I actually want to recruit you and take you along here and now."

"That is not a funny joke….. please do not say something like *you seem well-suited to betraying*."

"Naw, you're not the type to betray people. If anything

you’re more the type to abandon them in their face.”

”.........”

“Hmm? That was supposed to be a laughable joke.”

– although we would likely never cross paths again, much less have any run-ins with each other, in retrospect, it is fascinating to realize that I had found him a very amusing fellow. There are not many who have defined so clearly what it means to *betray*.

Miyoshi Kokoromi – Kokoromi-sensei said she would return to the ER3 System again. Well, I do not imagine they have any reason to reject someone of her talents, so all should be well on her end.

“Well, we shall not meet again, sensei.”

“Mmm. Y’sure? I think we’ll meet again soon, y’know.”

”..........”

“And y’know, it’ll be in an even more, more and more ridiculous and terrible a situation, but it’d sure fit ya fine. So, y’know, adios!”

Sensei left an ominous prediction for me yet again. Jeez, why is that person so bad at parting scenes? Cut me some slack, seriously.

Kasugai Kasuga. Kasugai-san – what is that person doing? She will do anything, to the point where I should really not be paying it any heed. In the truest meaning of the phrase, she will do anything. Of all people, I cannot imagine her ever being in a situation where she cannot find a way out. A human being that has nothing from the start except *talent*. There is nothing she wants and nothing she does not want, no satisfaction nor dissatisfaction, no fortune nor misfortune, nothing to protect and no idea what it means to want to destroy, not alive and thus no concept of death, has values but no sense of valuation, no problems and no

solutions – that is the sort of person she is.

If I may allow one prediction, I think she will end up being pulled into some part of the Kunagisa Syndicate. Because she is too talented as a scientist to be allowed to roam free. She, too, was someone I expected never to run into again, but - no, specifically for her, there are no buts.

Oogaki Shito – Uze Misachi. The two of them said they would tag along with Shadou Kyouichirou. Follow him wherever, forever. I did not say anything. There was nothing to say. There is nothing a person with no convictions can say to people with strong convictions.

And then.

Koutari Hinayoshi.

Koutari Hinayoshi – escaped.

The security guards standing guard over the foothills were said never to have seen him. Truly, like smoke, he disappeared like a puff of cloud.

“Disappear – although human beings do not just disappear.....”

However, you can vanish a human being.

And that is what happened.

”..... whoops, there was one more.”

Yes, one more, one that I cannot forget. One that I must never forget.

I thought that as I fell asleep the night of that day.

And then the next day. I forget easily, but I am a university student, and so I must go to school on weekdays. To be honest, I wanted to get some rest for another day, but I had already rested for three days for a little trip like this, and counting my hospitalization the previous month, I had already missed too many days of class. We were right before the exams, so no matter how bad my body is feeling,

I have an obligation to drag myself to class. I prepared to head to school (I could not use my arm, so Miiko-san helped me change), and then left the apartment. At the side of the alley, Houko-chan, who lives upstairs in my apartment building, was crouched over. The straw hat she wore to block off the sunlight fit her well and made for a cute scene.

"Yo, good morning, Houko-chan."

"Good morning, nonsense-using big brother," Houko-chan bowed her head without turning to face me. "Big brother is heading to school now?"

"Yes. What are you doing, Houko-chan?"

"I am killing bugs."

"..... I see. Keep at it."

"Yes. I will."

Just as I was about to walk past her, Houko-chan grabbed my trousers without turning her head to stop me. "Nonsense-using big brother."

"Big brother, if you go to school today, you'll probably die."

She said, casually.

And I answered, casually, "I know."

"You know but you're still going?"

"It is a worthless life anyways," I shrugged. "Plus, I have exams soon."

Is that so, Houko-chan let go. She still did not turn to look at me, but in any case, I waved my hand and resumed walking to university.

Class was as boring as ever. Thinking it boring is just a personal problem, so there is no point in complaining. That is what university is about. Regardless of whether we were just before exams or not, regardless of whether I attended

or not, this system will never, ever change. I passed time in the class that I found boring due to my own fault by reading the book *Shi no Kaisousen* 2) that I had borrowed from Nanami. The cover and the book itself was so old that it was somewhat hard to read. It was a box-bound hardcover, and it was oddly-shaped so that it did not fit in my bag, such was the incomprehensible taste of Nanami. However, I found the content of the book extremely amusing and interesting.

And then after lunch break came basic exercise. I bought a snack pastry for lunch, and then climbed the stairs to go to the fourth floor, where the basic exercise room resided. I wanted to use the elevator, but for whatever reason I did not feel like using the elevator today.

”..... what does not feeling like using the elevator mean, anyways.”

Come to think of it – Utsurigi hated elevators. Not that it mattered any, but I wondered why.

Was it because it made him feel trapped.....?

I arrived at the classroom while thinking that, and found myself looking upon a rather bizarre spectacle. Several of my classmates were lined up by the door, as if they were peeking in. They should just go in, but they all had a serious expression, peeping in on the classroom after cracking the door open just a bit.

”..... what are you all doing?”

“Oh, Ikkun,” Yashige-san (Wears coats during the summer. Collects beads as a hobby) looked in my direction. “Long time no see. Ah, you’re hurt again, too.”

“Mm. Hey you’re right it’s Ikkun,” Manayama-san (Jersey and high-heel. Considers Dogla + Magla scripture) 3) also noticed me, and waved me over. “C’mere’sec! Look, Ikkun,

don't jus' stand there an' c'mon an' look, lookylook."

"What? Just go in already–"

"Nowaynowaynoway!" Yoshimaki-kun (Combed-back blond hair and short jeans. Wants to become a space pilot) became agitated and held down my hand when I grabbed the knob. "What're you doing what're you doing, to our precious treasure?"

"Treasure?"

"There's a strange woman inside right now," Marchen-san (Hamster on the right shoulder. Goth-loli) explained. "And that's why it feels kinda – weird to go in?"

"Strange woman? Not a classmate?"

"Yeah! But she's really cool!" "Yeah! Seriously!" "Really pretty," "And really tall– with pretty hair–" "And long legs–" "Kinda seems like a wild type?" "Looks really strong!" "Like she can have her way with me?" "– and red–" "Feels hard to approach for some reason–" "Elegant but kinda manly, and really–"

"Wait."

I stopped them.

"Did someone just say *and red*?"

"Yup? I did, why?"

"– I have a feeling. Can everyone step aside and let me go through?"

Instantly, their eyes sparked. And as if they were waiting for the moment, their voices went in sync,

"Wow, Ikkun! He does something we never could, without even blinking! What a guy!" 4)

And they shouted with joy.

I hate them.

I ignored them and opened the door.

And then, of course.

"– yo."

Displaying too pompous an attitude was mankind's strongest contractor, Aikawa Jun, seated with both legs on top of my desk. As usual, she wore an insanely red suit and gave off an intimidating aura. Her appearance alone was like a work of art.

"What a coincidence to meet in a place like this, Ii-tan."

"– if this is a coincidence, no one would ever roll a die….."

"Hahah. True that," Aikawa-san laughed sarcastically, and then she jumped while remaining in that posture. She flew over a desk, and landed in front of me. "Yup. To tell you the truth, I came to see you."

"Uh huh….. well, sure, but please do not jump while in a seated position." 5)

"Oh don't be like that between the two of us, after all we've been through," Aikawa-san wrapped her arms intimately around my shoulder. Our faces, our chins became inordinately close. And then she faced my classmates and said, "So then, Extras, I'm gonna abduct this bride."

"Go ahead, please."

They said in unison.

I hate them so much.

The powerless nineteen-year-old bride was thus escorted, I mean dragged out of the classroom. Aikawa-san kept her arm around my shoulder and did not let go, or if anything it felt more like she locked her arm around me and kept our bodies together. As if she were trying to hug me to her. I wondered how we looked to others.

Certainly not lovers.

….. is what I immediately thought after simulating it in

my head, and a part of me felt a bit downed by that.

“Hmm? ’s wrong, Ii-tan? You’re even quieter than usual. Ya feeling down?”

“No….. and more importantly, could you please get off me?”

“What? That’s harsh,” Aikawa-san responded to me with a mocking tone. “Sister’s all hurt now, all hurt, if you’re gonna be like that. Ii-tan’s so cold. You cold person. Meanie meanie, monster-.”

“It’s hot. It’s summer. It’s hard to walk.”

“You just gotta admit you’re embarrassed. Such a boy,” Aikawa-san giggled and she finally let go. “Well, can’t say that’s not a cute point of yours. Maniacs into that stuff probably can’t get enough of it. So, how’re you doing?”

”….. what do you want? Coming to university. You seem surprisingly bored.”

“Mmm. More like I put a lot of effort into getting bored. I finally finished a job.”

“Is that so. A job.”

“Really cold, Ii-tan,” Aikawa-san said with a forced chuckle. “Alright, alright….. I’ll fess up then. Alright, I came here to see you.”

“Well of course. You said that earlier, too.”

We left campus. It was still lunch break, so campus was filled with people milling about. Aikawa-san and I weaved through the crowd. It seemed she had an objective, as she had no hesitation in her steps. I felt a bit of anxiety over where we might be headed, but I followed her anyways.

“In other words, I want to make up with you.”

Aikawa-san said. I was so incredibly surprised at how frank she was that I became speechless for a bit. And then right after that I felt like I had become extremely happy –

but at the same time, it felt a bit lacking.

Hmm. No. Not like this. Our Aikawa Jun is more–

“So I’m gonna make you apologize.”

Aikawa-san continued without nary a hitch. I balled my right hand and did a fist pump. That is it. That is it that is it that is it. That is Aikawa Jun.

“I do not mind – I do not mind at all,” I nodded. “Ishimaru Kouta-san. I was in the wrong, so I apologize.”

Aikawa-san puckered her lips in response and said, “Alright, forgiven.”

“Yup. I mean, I had to punch you there. But I wanna make up with you, so I’ll acquiesce.”

Ooph, is that her definition of acquiescing?

This is how Aikawa Jun needs to be.

“I do not mind then. I want to make up with Aikawa-san too–”

“It’s Jun,” Aikawa-san showed no mercy even now. “I keep telling you not to call me by my name. Cut it out and remember it already.”

”– I, too, do not want to fight with Jun-san.....” I mean, really, seriously. ”..... so, was that braided hair a wig or something?”

“Yup. Disguise equipment. The hat and the glasses. Well, it was pretty comically typical,” Aikawa-san answered while combing her hair up. “But you know, you didn’t notice for so long. I mean, I knew you knew how much I love disguising myself, but part of me wondered if you ended up never realizing it. Guess you aren’t that bad, though.”

“Well, of course..... I had completely forgotten, but if one is to take the Lupin III role, that would be it.”

“Hahah, maybe. But you know, I don’t think I gave any

hints about it this time, but Ii-tan, when'd you realize?"

"No, you gave a lot of hints..... for example, when we escaped the seventh ward, we got through the voice recognition system..... and *Kouta-san* called it simple, but there is no way it is anything simple. It is a defense system built by none other than Kunagisa Tomo, after all. Just any vocal mimicry would not cut it. And, you gave me the lock-picking knife. This is also strange. After giving me that, how in the world did *Kouta-san* go through other locks? But when it comes to these two, mankind's strongest's vocal mimicry and lock-opening skills would suffice....."

"So you came to that determination after using the same forced logic as Shadou Kyouichirou."

Aikawa-san playfully shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, you're right. **Anyone can perform vocal mimicry well enough to dupe people** – but I'm probably the only one that can mimic vocal wavelengths. I had to then, though."

"Jun-san was also the one that told me that no one would use the surname *Zerozaki*, too."

"Did I? I don't remember that."

"Indeed. But you know, all of those are after-the-fact reasons..... I realized, or rather, I thought something was wrong with *Kouta-san* at the very, very end. At the end, when *Kouta-san* gave me the lock-picking knife, she said, something like *The knife in your right pocket is not enough, is it?*."

"Hmm. I did, didn't I."

"But, I had equipped the knife in my left pocket," I said. "I moved it over because I thought it would be easier to reach that way. That morning. Yet despite that, *Kouta-san* said the *right pocket*. If she had said the knife in the left

pocket, it would simply be observational skills – but the knife in the right pocket meant it was simply **prior information**. And the only person who would have that prior information would be the person who gave me the knife and holster in the first place, Jun-san."

"– damn."

Aikawa-san slapped her forehead.

"Ahh….. I see. What a dumb slip."

"So Jun-san makes mistakes, too. I wondered if you had done it on purpose."

"Nah. I probably let down my guard a bit. Nah, not that. I was probably that pissed at you," she cynically laughed. "I'm still in need of training, I guess."

"Training. That is what Ishikawa Goemon said – however, this was quite mean of you, Jun-san. Why did you not just tell me? If I knew Ishimaru Kouta was Akawa Jun, I would have trusted you more–"

Trust. Oh come on, it was a job for me too. And you've got pretty loose lips. And above all, it was pretty funny seeing how you reacted."

"So that was the reason."

"I just meant to make fun of you when I first called out to you. But then the next day you got caught. Well I mean, I can't just leave you there then, can I?"

She said, as if it was the natural course of action to take.

"So, I figured I might as well keep teasing you while helping you, so I kept up my disguise–"

….. she said that as if it was the natural course of action to take, too.

"But then you started saying you didn't need my help. And you know, as a contractor I can't really help people who say they don't need help, so I was like what gives? …..

well, no," Aikawa-san shrugged. "Mmmmm, since we're at it, I'll be honest, but I was moved by your line then. *Glad that you were able to be friends*. That one, I missed my chance to talk."

Augh.

Ahh – that time. I did say something like that. Without thinking that I was saying it in front of the person. I said how I felt because I thought I was in front of *Kouta-san*, who I would *never see again*.

"I've been grateful that we'd become friends for a long time now," Aikawa-san said to me, mockingly. "I love you, Ii-tan."

"........."

Guah. Embarrassing. Very embarrassing. I. Eek. This is bad. Topic. Need to change topic. What. To what.

"B, but, why did you use an alias? How unlike Jun-san. Leaving Zerozaki Itoshiki aside as a bad joke, what was Ishimaru Kouta?"

"It's a bit complicated to explain, but..... well, to repeat myself, it was a job, so I couldn't help it. Well, there're work secrets so I can't really tell you much – but this job was actually a burglary contract, and basically Ishimaru Kouta actually exists."

"Huh – then Jun-san was burglarizing in that person's stead?"

"Yeah. Kouta and I don't get along. She talks politely like that, but she's really vile. She's not so much Lupin III so much as she's Kaijin Nijuumensou 6). The real Kouta wouldn't have asked for assistance nor have helped you. Well, I was gonna turn her down because it's a request from Kouta, but then I realized it put me in the same exact spot as you and Kunagisa-chan. And I was worried about you

two, so I accepted the job."

This person was putting personal feelings into her work!

"But, why did that – Kouta-san, the real one, ask Jun-san instead of doing it herself?"

"Mmhmm. That Kouta. She hates Neo."

That one put personal feelings in, too.

"I kinda like him though. You know, he's doing the most scumbag thing, but it's hard to hate him. Like a mouse? Hahah, maybe Ii-tan's a bit like that too?"

"Please do not put me in the same vein as that person….. but, that would mean Neo-san has been acquainted with Kouta-san in the past? But he still did not notice?"

"Of course he wouldn't. Leaving aside how good my disguise is, people don't really look at other people. Just the same as you not having recognized me. Ah, but Kunagisa-chan might have noticed."

"Might have."

Yes, with Kunagisa Tomo's eyes and memory, it would not be surprising if she had noticed. Although the problem is that she would not bother to tell anyone. Maybe that was why Kunagisa ended up spaced out when Kouta-san appeared in front of the cage in the basement of the fourth ward. Not that I had asked her, and I did not intend to ask her, for confirmation.

"Well, yeah. I guess it means this time I was Tuxedo Mask."

"………"

It appears mankind's strongest contractor enjoys comics for little girls.

"However – I guess you would not notice. Even though it was not like you had changed your height….. or did you?"

"I could, but there's no reason to. Once they've fixated on

a thought, people are really easy to trick. – ahh, but just one thing, the real Kouta doesn't wear glasses. That was just to trick you."

"Uh huh….. but just glasses…..?"

"That's how it goes. You know, they block out the eyes for juvenile suspects with a black bar, right? It's the same thing. Did you know if you cover the eyes it becomes really hard to recognize someone? You know. No matter what people wear, there's nothing you can do about the **eyes and fingerprints**," Aikawa-san continued. "That's why aside from that, you can **crush the eyes, wear sunglasses**, or in other cases **growing your hair long and hiding your entire face, or suddenly cutting the hair to turn into a skinhead** are pretty good tactics, kinda like wearing gloves."

"….. uh huh, I see," I tried to answer with as calm a voice as possible. "I see."

"There's nothing more I see than that. Well, that's all. So basically I was just using the name Ishimaru Kouta to trick Neo. Pretty good job by mankind's strongest contractor, right?"

Aikawa-san grinned.

Ahh, shit. Yes, yes, you're cool.

I feel like I am in love, literally.

"….. so, how did your job go?"

"Hmm? Like I said, I *finished a job*. When I say that, it means I finished it. This Aikawa Jun has never failed a job."

"Probably."

"Of course….. that was because you helped me, Ii-tan," Aikawa-san slapped my back again. "That was what you were doing, right? You gathered everyone in one spot, and

that let me roam freely around the facility. I'm especially grateful you make the first ward uninhabited."

"..... you are welcome," I absent-mindedly nodded. "Well, that was..... returning the favor a bit."

"How conscientious of you."

"I lie but I do not break promises."

"Mmhmm..... though that sounds like a giant lie. *Do not judge people by their appearances. Except for the wanted*, or something?"

"..... um, that, can we forget about that..... Mikoko-chan will be angry."

"Fufufu. This joke is mine."

"You are plagiarizing."

"Sounds like you don't know about conservation of energy. Like *Go forward while moving backwards, but moonwalk*!"

She has perfected it.

And then Aikawa-san stopped walking, and put out her right hand to me.

"And so. Handshake, for making up. Or would Ii-tan rather a kiss for making up?"

"Uh. Umm," I wavered, but I ended up just taking her hand, such a chicken I am. "Well, thank you."

"And you," Aikawa-san smiled seductively. "For a long, long relationship."

We left the university grounds, and Aikawa-san continued walking. Where in the world was she headed? Given how she was walking, it was clear she had a specific objective in mind, and I also did not expect her to tell me before we reached the place.

"Mm? What's that what's that? You're reading a pretty old book."

I did not know whether she knew how I felt, but regardless, she spotted Nanami's book jutting out of my bag.

"It is a book I have borrowed from a certain witch. Apparently a mystery novel."

"Hmm. Let me see," and then she pulled the book out of my bag, took it out of the box, and then flipped through the pages. But she seemed to quickly lose interest, and put the book back in the box. "Hmph. Boring. Just throw it away."

And just as she said that, she ripped the book, box included, in half, and then threw the remains toward West Main Street. Several trucks passed by right on time, and Nanami's book was extinguished from this world.

"........................"

"Feels good to throw away garbage."

"..... yes, indeed."

Goethe's words and Taishi's words were nothing in the face of Aikawa Jun. And of course, I have no words to offer to someone who can rip a hardcover book in half vertically, either. Ahh, jeez, it was a borrowed item, too..... well whatever, it was Nanami's, anyways. And it was all ragged anyways, I can just buy her a replacement. Should be about three-hundred yen at a used book store.

"Actually, I hate mystery books."

A bombshell statement.

"They say they like unexpected solutions but at the same time they fixate on including logic. And then they seek tantalizing mysteries. Don't they realize that if you stick to reason all you'll get are boring solutions? I mean, maybe I'll snort if 1 plus 1 became 3."

"Uh huh..... then what genre of books does Jun-san like?"

"A good question. Ii-tan, I hate things that try to shed light on the strange or try to put meaning to things. I love stories that're all mushy, like a boy staking his life for a girl. The stereotypical happenings, a royal road story, a cast of characters you've seen before, a familiar type of villain. The overused conflict of justice and evil, the hot-blooded idiot and the logic-bound idiot. A tearful happy end for the rival friends. I really love those."

"….. I see. Royal roads."

"Yup. There's no need for the unexpected. There's no need for surprises. I don't mind cheap tricks….. a royal road to fit the king. In the end, off-road paths and cunning schemes are for the clowns and side characters. Don't you think so? Hmm?"

"….. I have no words."

"If you say so," Aikawa-san smiled, satisfied.

"Right, royal roads reminds me – don't you think this Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility story has similarities with the Wet Crow's Feather Island incident?

"Has similarities…"

The gathered geniuses. The isolated situation. And the sealed-room death, the body parts that were never discovered after having been taken away–

"Yes. Now that you mention it, it does seem as similar as mystic eyes to contrition."

"Come to think of it, without that incident, I would have never met you–"

"What is with that line. You are making it sound like a tearful final episode."

Aikawa-san simply curled her lips and laughed at my joke. "Ii-tan, do you believe in meetings of destiny?" I thought for a moment, and then shook my head.

“I can believe in destiny – but I do not believe in meetings.”

“I see. Figures,” Aikawa-san said. ”– however, while it was similar to the April case, there were several absolute differences. First, in that case there were two, three – or four? anyways, there were a few, but in this case there was only one. Well, the reason for this is just that you **got just a bit** serious this time. Well, the bigger difference is that this time all the geniuses that were gathered were ***enemies* of yours**. You were hardly noticed on the island that time – you were hardly an enemy, but this time you were a fantastic *enemy*.”

”….. enemy.”

There was not one person who was fond of you, and even the victim was an enemy of yours. Seriously, isn’t that rare? The structure of the incident was **essentially identical** but the end result was the exact opposite. You did the same thing, but that the result was completely different is not something that logically happens often. This story makes you realize that what’s important isn’t the plot but the characters. That’s right, it’s like we took the Wet Crow’s Feather Island case, turned it over, and got **the backside** of it.”

”– Sounds like a boring story for Jun-san. I do not remember anything about that whacky island except for my love story with Akari-san.”

“I see. That’s fine.”

So said mankind’s strongest in a carefree tone as she yawned and walked. However, I was not allowed to be duped by that carefree attitude.

Yes, I must not forget.

The role of the contractor in the story.

The meaning of this person that appears at the end.

Yes – if the truth of this case, was that it was a **turned-over version of the Wet Crow's Feather Island case** that had caused Aikawa-san and I to meet – then what royal road twist lay in wait ahead?

Royal road.

Promised.

– promised.

As we passed by high school students on a school trip, we crossed Imadegawa Street. And after going a bit further, Aikawa-san finally stopped walking, and entered a cafe there. The cafe, which played an FM Radio station through its speakers, was pretty filled, perhaps because it was around noon. Was Aikawa-san going to treat me for a meal? Then why should I do with the pastry I had bought? Wait, no, this is not the time to be wondering about such carefree things.

I sat, and Aikawa-san sat herself opposite me. And then we ordered drinks without much thought, and then she said, "So, Ii-tan."

"Do you know what my other business is?"

"– about the case? Probably."

"A businesslike answer. If you could crack a joke here your life would be so different," Aikawa-san laughed. "Well, if you want to say it's about the case, you'd be right – but let's chat a bit more before then. We still have some time."

Aikawa-san said, without looking at a clock. This person's internal clock was as accurate as an atomic clock, so she had no need for digital nor analog clocks. However, it bothered me that she used the word *still*. Or rather – I finally realized it because of that word. Just as I had

realized Aikawa-san's disguise because of *knife in your right pocket.*

I see. **So that is why he was able to escape from that facility without being caught by anyone**. Indeed, with this person's help – it would be possible against anything.

Perhaps – that. That was this contractor's job all along. Following that theory, would it not explain why Aikawa-san did not reveal her identity to me?

….. I think that may be overthinking it, however – however, I cannot throw away the illusion. In that case, including the case of Neo-san, would it not mean that by the point mankind's strongest had acted, that research facility – had in fact long since been left and abandoned?

My mind raced, but caring not for my inner thoughts, Aikawa-san asked,

"So, what's happened between Kunagisa-chan and you, since then?"

"What has happened….. nothing. Nothing has changed, why? We toured Nagoya together, and then I helped her home yesterday, and I have not seen her since."

"I see," Aikawa-san nodded. "Well, that's, how it would be I guess."

"Why do you ask?"

"No no, I just thought you like being hugged more than you like hugging."

"I do not understand, Jun-san."

"That's because I'm making it unclear. It'd be a pain if you got it. Anyways, your loyalty to Kunagisa-chan surprises me – loyalty. Like a medieval knight."

"You are praising me too much."

"Am I. I'm being pretty objective. Yup, but that said, your clumsiness really stood out this time."

“Did it.”

It did, Aikawa-san laughed.

“Especially – what was that? Narrowing down the suspects through process of elimination, that theorizing. Were you trying to elicit a laugh?”

“You were listening?”

“Just the start. It was so stupid I couldn’t listen after a while. So I heard most of it afterwards – and I had to jump around in darkness while Ii-tan was doing a puppet show. That was more important.”

”.........”

Heard most of it afterwards.

Now, who did she hear from?

”*Rooftop route*. You know, I should say something about your naming sense–” Aikawa-san said. “Can’t use it because a woman. Can’t use it because rotund. Can’t use it because old. Can’t use it because bad sight – hey hey. None of those are actual reasons, you know?”

“Is that so?” I feigned ignorance. “I do not think so.”

“Well it’s risky, for sure. But that’s why you’d want to take the risk, I’d think? Take it the other way and it means as long as you handle that risk, you escape suspicion. –and you know, to be frank,” Aikawa-san pointed her thumb at herself. “I – this Aikawa Jun. Regardless of gender, while carrying a 250 kilogram dumbbell, even if I’ve become a grandma of a hundred years, even with my eyes closed – I’d still jump ten meters.”

“Well, Jun-san..... is out of the question. I mean, you can run along walls.”

“I can run along ceilings, man. And you know of outliers like me, so why would you throw away outliers like that? Did you forget what happened last month already? Of

course not.”

“Last month….. well, true. But not one person said *no, I can jump this distance*.”

“Of course they wouldn’t. It’d put them back on the list of suspects. Maximizing the **system** of process of elimination like you did was something, I’ll give you that. Process of elimination – anyone would pipe up if they were told *you’re the suspect*, but no one pipes up after being told *you’re not the suspect*. They wouldn’t retort when things are in their favor.”

Process of elimination.

From a psychology standpoint – there is no more foolish a methodology. However, there are situations in this world where that foolishness is the greatest weapon available – and not just a few.

”– but really, I think that distance is pretty difficult. Even I would not want to try that without being in such a situation.”

“If you wanna go there – then you could use the **theory of process of elimination** and wonder if it were possible even for Koutari. It’s one thing if he were an athletic muscle man, but he’s a middle-aged science geek, you know? Can he really jump that?”

“Who knows?”

I still maintained feigning ignorance. There was no meaning to feigning ignorance, but it was fun having Aikawa-san corner me like this. Though it may be a bit masochistic.

“But, otherwise you would not be able to explain what happened. It was the only feasible solution, so I could not refute it.”

“Hmm. I see. You’re gonna be like that, Ii-tan. How cute.

C'mere," Aikawa-san took the opposite side of the spectrum and smiled sadistically. "Then….. you know. That story about going back, about how Koutari made a rope with his hair and used Utsurigi's arm as a hook to escape the seventh ward – you seriously believe that."

"Seriously seriously, and an extra, third seriously, at that."

"Swear to god?"

"Swear to god."

"Swear to Chiga Hikari?"

"I cannot."

"– you're so friggin' cute….." Aikawa-san laughed, exasperated. "Well….. let's say you could sling a rope from the seventh ward to the sixth ward that way."

Aikawa-san said.

"– so, **what then**?"

"………"

"It can support the weight of a human being. That's great. But what then? You make rope, use centrifugal force and momentum to hook it on the building. This is already pretty nutty – but what do you do after? Tightrope walking or something?"

"Maybe you do?"

"With the strength of a science geek? Not even circuses nowadays try tightrope walking without even carrying a stick. Even if you pulled out the kids from that school, Saijou Tomoe's probably the only one who could pull it off, you know? And then considering your life is on the line, you wouldn't be able to do it with any normal sense of calm."

"No, you cannot say that for sure. While the probability is low, it does not mean that it is zero. You never know

what people with their lives on the line can do."

"You're saying the opposite thing as you did earlier, Mister Whatever Works Now," Aikawa-san laughed. "Then I'll say the opposite, too. – hey. If you're putting something as precious as your life on the line, why would you take such a dangerous gamble?"

"........."

"If you're gonna try such an idiotic attempt at tightrope walking, you've got a better shot living by just jumping down."

"No, but. That would just be faultfinding," I tried escaping by leaving a red herring, like in mystery novels. "The solution offered at the end is the truth. And in the end, Koutari-san completely accepted the suspicion–"

"Accepted, eh – hahah," Aikawa-san laughed drily.

"Umm, what was it? The proof – was the hand print on his arm? But you know, Koutari never actually **showed that hand print** did he?"

"He must have given up."

"Given up – laughable," Aikawa-san really laughed this time. "Ahh, whatever. I'm tired of talking, Ii-tan, come over here."

"– what are you going to do?"

"Punch you."

There is no idiot that would hear that and walk over. I did not move, and replied by showing her both of my palms. Aikawa-san saw that and motioned to come over, saying, "alright, alright."

"I won't punch you, so come here."

I heard that and felt relieved, and walked over.

She kissed me.

"...

“Hmm? What’s with that look. It’s not like it’s your first time kissing is it?”

”….. well, that, is true…..”

I shrugged my shoulders again and showed composure. With a completely unbothered attitude, I combed back my hair, crossed my legs, sipped coffee, and then spread my arms out.

….. actually, it was my first time.

“Anyways, what I want to say, User of Nonsense. Is that if you’re going to come up with a farce, you should bring a more believable lie.”

”………”

Farce – exactly. As Professor Kyouichirou said, it was what a *stereotypical scam artist would do*. Replacing the truth with a memorable lie. And then to truncate the conclusive half of reasoning. To output a vague, half-finished solution, to offer a solution that could be interpreted in any number of ways, and to replace the truth with confusion.

There was no need for a correct solution.

There just needed to be an unexpected solution.

Yes, there was never a need for me to uncover the truth.

I just needed to surprise them.

No matter how you look at it, psycho logical.

Not actions, but logic of recognition.

“There was no helping it–” I shifted my eyes away in an effort to divert attention. Of course, Aikawa-san did not take her eyes off me. Ahh, what would you call it, a verge of white? “I had no time. There was no helping the lack of fine-tuning of details. I realized **what was going on** really at the last second, you know? And I had to come up with it while I had painkillers numbing my thoughts after Kokoromi-sensei treated me, so of course there would be

holes."

And, and more than anything, having to act out the unexpectedness was difficult. For example, *there was a ladder in one of the research wards* or *used a helicopter* would be so ridiculous that no one would believe it. But it still had to be surprising.

"Stop making excuses, idiot."

Wow, so harsh.

"You know – **the detective and the suspect and the victim were all accomplices**, so you would end up with an admission of guilt by the suspect no matter what you said. So you might as well come up with something more elegant."

"But according to Koutari-san himself, it was a sixty, so I was given a passing grade."

"That's too nice. I woulda given you a one."

"You are really harsh."

However, I cannot deny that I had every card going for me. As the role of the suspect he had already prepared a solution for me – so all I had to do was decide how to cook it.

And that was not all, because I also had a favorable set of cast members. The researchers, the academics that had gathered in that research facility. They are used to wonders being wonders. They understand that this world holds secrets aplenty. A puppet show is a very simple performance for an audience like that.

That was why all I had to do was point out their oversights – point out their obscure and irrelevant oversights that they had subconsciously avoided because they were not worth any time. Given the suspect was an accomplice, it was like a rigged race.

And – pointing out oversights is the forte of the user of nonsense.

A bluff to buy time, a counterfeit philosophy.

If all I had to do was surprise them, then it played right into my hands. The smarter they are, the sweeter the sound made by nonsense.

“Well, considering that the one point was for the one point needed, it might’ve been a passing grade anyways.”

“What was rough for me was that I realized things in **reverse order**. You know….. when did you realize the truth, Jun-san?”

“Don’t ask. These things are better left unsaid,” Aikawa-san raised both of her hands. “And, you’ll feel better not knowing.”

”……….”

”….. well, looks like it’s about time. See ya, Ii-tan,” Aikawa-san gulped down the rest of her cup and leaned back. And then she pulled out red sunglasses from her pocket, put them off, and then faced me. “I’ll go ahead and ask, because this might be the last chance to ask. Hey, Ii-tan – did you really never, not for a moment, not in the slightest, ever suspect Kunagisa-chan?”

She asked that, as if she were asking on the side.

And that made me pause for a moment.

“For Kunagisa, the lock to the seventh ward is like her pinky finger. You understood that, didn’t you? The Professor wasn’t just blaming her for the sake of it. I’m pretty sure to some extent he was dead serious. Because there’s no other logical solution. Mmm, no, no, forget about that unimportant **boring garbage** like feasibility or impossibility or motives or reasons – Ii-tan. Were you sure Kunagisa Tomo would never kill Utsurigi Gaisuke?”

”.........”

Mine even if I threw it away.

Unpleasant, for someone else to pick up my trash.

”– I.”

“You don’t need to answer. I just wanted to ask,” Aikawa-san placed a finger over my lips as I began. “You worked hard this time. So, give it go for just a bit longer. I’m, I’m glad, that my friend is an awesome guy.”

Aikawa-san said as she stood up with the check in one hand. She looked terribly dashing, incredibly gallant, unbelievably cool, magnificently red. So bright, that it was hard for someone like me to look at her directly. No, probably, I had never been able to look directly at her.

However, even so, while looking straight at the red that hurt my eyes, I opened my mouth.

“Aikawa-san. If we meet again.....”

“Yup? What?”

“Will you sleep with me?”

A voice that was clearly forced into being calm.

I knew, that I was covering it.

I knew, that I was not covering it well.

Aikawa-san looked a bit surprised at me, and had a stunned expression, a rare show of infantile-ness, but the next moment she reverted to her sadistic nihilistic grin, and stuck out her bright red tongue.

“You’re a hundred years early, virgin.”

And then she flipped the bird at me.

“Well, if we find ourselves in a consummate situation, let us meet again, dear friend.”

So she said in the end with Kouta-san’s voice, and without waiting for my response, turned her back to me, and left the cafe. I was left behind alone at the two-person

table. I did not think anything for a while. I did not want to think anything. However – that was not a luxury I could afford. I must always be thinking. By the time I realized it, I had found myself in such a situation.

In the end – who was her employer?

Ishimaru Kouta?

Neo Furuara?

Utsurigi Gaisuke?

Or perhaps – Koutari Hinayoshi?

”….. however, next time.”

If such a thing.

If such a thing were actually an option for me or not. What a difficult question to answer. However, if Aikawa Jun were to remain a friend of mine, then it did not sound like a bad idea to devote some effort into making a next time happen. It might not be a bad idea to live a million years.

I thought.

I pondered.

”*Do not judge a person by their appearance* – well, you are right, Aikawa-san.”

I thought as I sipped the coffee in front of me. If one were to ask if it were possible or impossible for Kunagisa to perform the crime, I can say without a doubt that it were impossible. Kunagisa has that bizarre trait – or perhaps more accurately an oppressive illness that prevents her from moving vertically on her own. As such, using the stairs or elevator, or other such transportation mediums are not an option for her. Theoretically and physically impossible.

However.

If one were to adhere to untheoretical, unphysical

hypotheticals. If you were to ask if Kunagisa would kill Utsurigi.

Kunagisa might not do it.

However, *Dead Blue* might.

Is what I thought.

”– such nonsense.”

Yes, this is of course simply nonsense.

However.

Even if that security were meaningless in front of Kunagisa. Even if on one else could bypass that security. All that meant was that Kunagisa held the master key – and even if Kunagisa herself could not actually execute the crime, if she were to hand the key over to someone else. Like how Kouta-san – like how AIkawa-san had given me the anti-lock blade.

It would have been possible.

“In the end, it depends on what Kunagisa and Utsurigi said to each other that day,” I mumbled, complaining. “I cannot imagine, a conversation between those two geniuses–”

I cannot even begin to imagine.

But if Kunagisa had **told him**.

If?

It would mean Utsurigi was able to walk around the facility at his leisure. He could disarm the security, erase the logs. He could walk around the facility as he wished.

If he knew the back door – he just needed to use the backdoor. Refraining would simply be the last shred of dignity for the underhanded, anyways.

”.........”

Of course, if Kunagisa had told me the backdoor, I would not have been able to carry it out. I lacked the skill to use

the backdoor. However, Utsurigi – that malignant did have the skill. And the brain to understand it – and the arms to carry it out.

Then of course, Kunagisa must have told him. *You can escape from here if you use this*. She would have taught him every last detail.

But Utsurigi rejected it. He was not able to accept that offer. He was not imprisoned in the small building called the seventh ward. He was imprisoned in the palm of Shadou Kyouichirou.

That was why Utsurigi destroyed his own existence.

"And he also destroyed Professor Shadou Kyouichirou."

Truly a cracker, truly malignant bacteria.

It was a story that made you wonder who the Mad Demon truly was. Truly just destroying. Truly, doing nothing but destroying. No saving, no forgiving, no cursing, no killing, just destroying. A story that was too ridiculous, too ironic, too unshapely.

In the end – even though it was unnecessary, even though it was obvious Utsurigi would never escape for as long as the Professor used Kunagisa as a shield – even so for Professor Kyouichirou to have locked up Utusrigi in the seventh ward – why he was forced to lock him up.

Fear toward Utsurigi Gaisuke.

Fright toward Utsurigi Gaisuke.

Fear and the same toward Kunagisa Tomo.

"That Professor knew all along, too….."

Ahh, I see, I finally realized.

The Professor found out that I had escaped from the cage not because of any reason like foresight, but rather because he had been passed the word. I see. He was annoyed because I was unable to solve the mystery – that I was

unable to reach the conclusion that he had already prepared.

Indeed.

Including his conversation with Neo-san, I realized now just how many hints he had strewn so brazenly about–

“But you still never notice–” I put the emptied cup of coffee back on the plate. “But how are you supposed to notice? Although I suppose you could also ask who was supposed to notice.”

It was quite absurd.

Did I really have to put up with that absurdity? Did I really have to go along with that absurdity? Akawa-san gave me one point for my reasoning – but even that one point may have been too much for that reasoning. And even I could not rate this truth.

Ahh, Professor Kyouichirou.

Now, finally, I truly understand how you felt.

And Kunagisa Tomo.

Utsurigi Gaisuke.

“There is no way I can think and understand, or even listen and accept how you guys feel.....”

Much less predict their thoughts.

But the solution offered at the end is the truth.

That is the rule.

The puppet show rule.

It does not need to be understood. It did not need to be accepted.

It did not need rewards, it did not need ratings.

Nor demand, nor request.

Just, follow.

Silent like a lamb, feed like a pig.

”– the upmost logic, you scum.”

Make Hell the Hell named Hell.

Massacre the Massacre named Massacre.

Guilt the Guilt named Guilt.

Despair the Despair named Despair.

Confuse the Confusion named Confusion.

Dominate the Domination named Domination.

Don't hold back, none can obstruct us.

Be proud, we, of this beautiful world.

This is the bedroom of the verge of death, rampage all you want as the verge of death allows it.

”….. freedom as you like and do as you wish, dying and reviving – what are you all, *Otokojuku*[7)]?”

Truth….. the truth?

How stupid. How stupid. How stupid.

What is truth. What is real.

Cut it out.

This is – just a result.

But.

If you come up with results – no one can complain.

“No matter how you explain it or interpret it – it is nonsense.”

It is not that I do not understand.

I do not know.

That is why my explanation, is to not explain.

Go forward while moving backwards.

The last wall.

– and then the waitress hurried over, having noticed the empty coffee cup. She asked if I wanted seconds, but I turned her down. Is that so, she parted with a smile. It was just a business smile, but even if it were a fake smile, smiles were great. Great things – never disappear.

”– and this is it for nonsense.”

Thump.

Echoing footsteps.

That sound echoed above the endless FM Radio sounding through the cafe.

Thump – thump thump – thump thump thump – thump thump thump thump – thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump ——-

My left arm throbbed at that sound. I thought of the knife I still had equipped under my jacket, at the Jericho still hanging off the belt of my trouser. Well well, how unreliable an armament.

And then the footsteps passed by me – and sat down across from me. In the seat that was until just now occupied by mankind's strongest, without any hesitation whatsoever.

Legs crossed, and arms folded elegantly, too.

Covered in a rather stylish fashion. Probably from some famous brands, a pure white suit. Gloves. Shoes. Wristwatch. Instead of a lab coat, this was probably the standard fashion. But everything seemed to fit oddly with the bald head, resulting in a unique but intimidating aura.

While he wore sunglasses just as he did in the facility, the lenses were no longer orange nor black, but rather an opaque, as close-to-translucent-as-can-be green.

And on the other side of the green were his grinning, grinning, laughing eyes. But the back of his eyes were not smiling at all.

And he.

And he, continued, to say nothing.

"– ahh, it was my turn."

He was a surprisingly conscientious fellow.

Despite the situation, I felt a bit pleased.

The face of the rolled dice was pleasing.

I did not hate, nor did I find it unpleasant.

"Did you cut off the arms simply because of the fingerprints?"

He–

Silently, affirmed. As if smiling, nodded.

It was a very easy answer.

Truly, an easy solution.

If every – if every time, problems could be solved like this, so cleanly, so clearly, so acceptably, so satisfyingly – it would be great.

"Come to think of it – you were the only one that called Kunagisa *Dead Blue* – no one else knew of that alias to begin with."

Shut up and watch, Kunagisa Tomo.

Kunagisa – probably knew everything from the start.

That Ishimaru Kouta was Aikawa Jun.

The truth, the reality behind the scenes.

And this conclusion.

And yet she remained silent.

She remained silent, and watched.

Alright, that is not bad at all.

That is not betrayal.

There is no betrayal where there is no conviction.

There is no betrayal where there is trust.

Even I–

Learned how to remain silent.

"Well, then–"

Well then, everyone.

Please bear with me just a bit longer.

I cannot quit such – amusement.

Let us begin the beginning of the end.

"You actually hate Kunagisa Tomo, don't you?"

Utsurigi – Utsurigi Gaisuke, suddenly, without any forewarning or prefacing, as if it were the most natural of natural things in the world, without one bit of wavering or holding back, without a moment of hesitation or a trace of mercy, yet without any sense of pressure or any sense of accusation, as if admiring and disdaining, as slick and smoothly as if he were saying the most obvious of the obvious, asked.

I answered.

"I don't know."

MAD DEMON & DEAD BLUE
is Very Very DEAD END.

1) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seiza
2) Fast-sailing Ship of Death by Oosaka Keikichi
3) BL comic
4) From Jojo Phantom Blood. Yes, Nishio, we got you.
5) William Zepelli
6) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nij%C5%AB_Mens%C5%8D
7) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sakigake!!_Otokojuku